Taking back the technical
contemporary circus dramaturgy beyond the logic of mimesis

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Abstract

Mimetic approaches to circus dramaturgy displace the formal qualities of circus tricks, privileging the body's capacity to *refer* over its capacity to *affect*. In such a context, specific circus tricks tend to become interchangeable, generalized, and ultimately devalued. What if we were instead to build a dramaturgical discourse which takes circus technique itself as a starting point? This thesis seeks to think and write circus technique as a staged material process—as a joining-together and coming-apart of human bodies, technical discourses, and material objects—which brings its various component parts in and out of mimetic referentiality. Such an approach gestures towards the rich potential of an alliance between circus theory and materialist philosophy.

Inspired by Maaike Bleeker's dramaturgical practice, in which a heightened awareness of that which is emerging in the studio subsequently serves to ground rigorous reflection about the possible implications of these emergences, I use the vocabulary of materialist theory to direct the dramaturgical gaze towards four affective parameters. These parameters concern the trick's territorializing force; its revelation of the realm of the virtual; its problematization of agency (as shown in Ilmatila's *Gangewifre*); and its apparent cause. In doing so, my intention is to enable artists and dramaturgs to think, speak, and perform circus technique with an eye to its real nuance and fullness.

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[illustration by Natalie Oleinik]

Introduction

0,1 | Le Vide *and the problem of reference*

Contemporary circus is a field in conflict. On the one hand, it is distinguished from the other contemporary performing arts by the inclusion of circus technique; broadly, acrobatics and manipulation in their various forms. The curricula of the thirteen state-recognized institutions of higher circus education—the milieu from which the vast majority of contemporary circus artists emerge—include theater, dance, and music classes, but place the circus disciplines squarely at the heart of their endeavor. On the other hand, a chorus of voices from within the field deny the value of circus technique staged on its own terms, insisting in the name of dramaturgy that it remain "but a means for something other than itself" (Guy 2012, 44).[1] The chronic demand that circus technique function dramaturgically as mimetic representation, and that the circus artist justify and validate herself by being able to identify in language the object of that mimesis, creates the paradoxical situation in which it becomes difficult to 'fit' circus technique into circus performance.

A good example of this phenomenon is *Le Vide,* a circus show by Fragan Gehlker, Alexis Auffray and Maroussia Diaz Verbèke, which has been playing since 2011. *Le Vide,* according to its website, is "an extremely physical re-reading of Albert Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*" (accessed June 7 2016, translation my own). To that end, Gehlker spends the show climbing ropes which unexpectedly detach from the ceiling while he dangles in mid-air, the man and the rope both crashing into a waiting mat from a height of many meters. Duly mimicking Camus' hero, Gehlker continues to climb and fall until all seven ropes have tumbled to the ground, and then proceeds to re-attach them all, gesturing towards the 'eternal recurrence' of the process.

Le Vide is a successful show in the sense that it does what it sets out to do: as a spectator, the content of the show is clear, and the metaphor is a strong one. We identify with the main character and draw parallels between his failures and ours, his toil and our own. When at the end of the work the musician (Alexis Auffray) rushes by on roller skates with a series of placards reading '*Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux*',[2] gusts of wind kicked up by his speed blowing gently past the collected faces of the gathered crowd, we are touched. We find that yes, we too feel ready to shoulder the burden of existential absurdity.

Le Vide functions as a persuasive mouthpiece for Camus at a time when delving into philosophical texts seems a less and less popular pursuit. It is interesting to notice, however, that within the work's dramaturgical framework—a framework which is governed by the logic of mimetic representation—the circus trick struggles to function. The full range of vertical rope technique, the diverse lexicon of drops, knots, climbs developed since the institutionalization of the discipline, is almost absent from *Le Vide*. Indeed, tricks seem out of place when they do appear: it is, after all, difficult to imagine a situation which might convincingly prompt Sisyphus to do a straddle-climb. Reading performance as mimesis, the circus trick stumps us: to what does a star-drop or a hip-key *refer*?

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[1] A chorus of voices: "circus, as a language, does not have a lot to do with technique" (Guy 2012, 48); "Technique is what covers the structure of art, but its essence is the artist's vision that exists independent of technique" (Gulko 2012, 84); "we will not create artistically renewing work only through the repetition of technical skill and existing 'repertoire', and skill itself does not need to be placed at the core of our practice" (Lievens 2015, 6-7).

[2] "We must imagine Sisyphus to be happy" (translation my own).

Post-dramatic theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann defines mimesis as the imitation of human action. A mimetic approach to dramaturgy cues the spectator to fixate "onto the the cognitive program 'Action/Imitation'" by organizing a series of staged actions according to the symbolic value of the 'lived' actions to which they appear to refer (Lehmann 2006, 37). According to Lehmann, such an emphasis on reference inevitably causes the spectator to miss the texture of "that which offers itself to the senses as presentational action, in order to assure itself only of the represented, the (assumed) 'content', the signification, and finally the meaning, the sense" (2006, 37). Mimetically-structured circus performance elides the detailed differing of the technical circus body, preferring to highlight instead its similarity to other bodies, its legibility through adherence to established techniques of self-representation.

Thus, mimetic logic essentially renders the trick incidental, and shifts the burden of meaning-making onto the elements of circus performance rooted in the practices of other fields, primarily physical theatre. Only in the most abstract way can we read circus technique as mimesis—static positions as a metaphor for 'suspension', drops as 'gravity' or 'defeat', climbs as 'ascension'—and only by grouping technique into certain classes which function interchangeably (i.e., a star-drop and a cartwheel both refer to 'descent'): mimetic dramaturgy absents the circus trick as it is, nuanced and articulating, and posits it as a flat symbol.

How can we deal with this excess—the elements of circus which escape metaphorical capture—when talking about, and making, circus performance? What kinds of performative concepts might allow circus technique back into circus dramaturgy? In this thesis I will take a rigorous and unromantic approach to circus, mapping its formal properties in an effort to enable makers and commentators to 'think circus technique' on its own terms. This tight focus is not in the interest of promoting a 'pure art', and certainly not to suggest that circus must never borrow from or intersect with dance, theatre, and performance art. To the contrary, it is precisely in order to promote rich hybrid forms that it is necessary to develop a theory of meaning-making particular to the field. Without a proper conception of the way circus technique itself generates meaning, the trick will always function as firework and spectacle, its formal specificity consistently overflowing the internal organization of the work. Only when circus develops its own dramaturgical principles can it function effectively in a multi-disciplinary work alongside other performative genres.

0,2 | *The contemporary circus has rejected spectacle*

The very idea that circus might turn away from its own specificity—from acrobatics and manipulation, from the performance of skill—might seem strange to a reader unfamiliar with the discourse. How could it possibly be difficult to find a place for circus technique in a circus show? The story of how exactly we arrived at such an incoherent position is one for a historical survey, and is not the focus of the present investigation. Nevertheless, we can attempt to situate the imposition of a regime of mimetic dramaturgy within the broader cultural context of the industrialization of production and institutionalization of cultural actors, at a time critical both of Modernism and the 'Society of Spectacle'.

What exactly changes in circus as it sheds traditionalism and moves towards the contemporary? Lay knowledge would claim that contemporary circus 'adds content' to traditional form. This assertion, however, is based on the false assumption that narrative and character never figured in traditional circus spectacle. Quite to the contrary, Philip Astley, credited with inventing the modern circus, was known for staging 'hippodramas' in his covered amphitheater, "swashbuckling horse-borne melodramas" which brought "recent

news of imperial exploits or Gothic legends" to the gathered 18th-century Londoners (Kwint 2016, 332). I claim rather that contemporary circus performance is distinguished from the traditional (and today's heir to the traditional, the commercial acrobatic spectacle) in that it refuses to unironically make the production of simple pleasure its primary concern. Instead, contemporary circus artists design affective experiences for spectators which are rooted in a certain authorial intentionality. Contemporary circus conceptualizes performance as valuable beyond its ability to please; that is, beyond its commodity-value or spectacularity.[3] This shift in position is enabled and informed by the institutionalization of circus education, production, and presentation, heralded by the founding of the first accredited university of circus arts—the Centre nationale des arts du cirque (CNAC)—in 1985.

In her account of the genesis of contemporary circus in 1970's France, Martine Maleval confirms that the movement was founded in opposition to what she calls "spectacles of facile entertainment" (2016, 51). The "agitators" who began to move circus into the contemporary "insisted on the artistic and cultural dimension of their direction [and] advocated for the elaboration and construction of an *authentic art form*" (2016, 52; emphasis mine). Maleval positions this quest for artistic authenticity as an explicit rejection of entertainment for its own sake. Although the historical evidence for her assertions is rather vague, what is clear is that by the time of her writing (2001) the rejection of the spectacular as an end in itself had become key to contemporary circus' claims to artistic legitimacy. And not without reason: nearly 60 years after the publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and 30-odd after *Society of the Spectacle*,[4] the socio-ethical implications of the production of popular entertainment had in some ways foreclosed the possibility of its uncritical intrusion into 'serious' artistic circles.[5] Of course the question arises: in a form hitherto utterly defined by the will to "turn [...] skills to profit" (Kwint 2016, 331), by what token could an un-spectacular circus still qualify as circus? In other words, what should a contemporary circus university teach its students? Eventually what is designated as circus becomes the set of technical disciplines which arose in the context of spectacle-production, extracted from their genetic territory and asked to operate as an artistic language.

The particular way in which these deterritorialized bodies of technical knowledge were authorized to function in the new idiom—the conditions of their reterritorialization— was determined by a confluence of contingent cultural forces. On one front, the tail-end of elitist Modernism and the shockwaves of May '68 engendered a mistrust of art working in a primarily formal register; indeed, the 'agitators' of contemporary circus' founding generation saw their movement as a rejection of staid notions of disinterested aesthetic judgment (Maleval 2016). On another, as Ana Vujanović[6] explains in her article, '(In) the Person of the

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[3] Note that the rejection of spectacle does not necessarily make contemporary circus truly *contemporary*, in the sense of grappling with contemporaneity. Here I simply attempt to draw out the difference between traditional and contemporary circus, without commenting on the appropriateness of their respective qualifiers.

[4] By Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (2002 [1947]) and Guy Debord (1994 [1967]), respectively.

[5] Spectacle is here understood, after Guy Debord, as 1. commodified experience, and 2. representation which appears (temporarily or permanently) to replace reality (1994).

[6] Vujanović writes about dance; nevertheless, her observations about the cult of personality which began to accrue to artists in the 20th century reach far beyond the dance field, applying to artistic production in general.

Author', the fetish for authenticity engendered by the 'Age of Mechanical Reproduction'[7] shifted its locus "during the 20th century from artworks to artists [....] This trend was fostered further by the emancipatory politics of the '60s that was condensed into such slogans as 'be individual', 'be unique', 'be different', 'be yourself', etc" (2012, 3-5). As a result, circus techniques were in a single stroke dislocated from the production of spectacle and re-assigned to a new task-master: authorial self-expression in the form of the performance of personality, character, or narrative (fig. 1). Contemporary circus adopted a model in which circus performance conveys psychological or emotional information about the staged self—a dramaturgy of mimetic representation—as the condition of its artistic validation.

From a contemporary perspective, the critique of spectacle levied at the traditional circus remains a valid artistic concern, and perhaps more than ever: witness the ineluctable incursion of simulation-mediation into reality thanks to the advent of mobile communication technologies. On the other hand, the easy replacement of the spectacular with the personal seems less than self-evident today. Indeed, the 21st-century discourse surrounding post-Fordist capitalism and the commodification (*spectacularization*) of our feelings and personalities begs the question: does the uncritical representation of the charismatic self on stage not simply produce a *different kind of spectacle*?
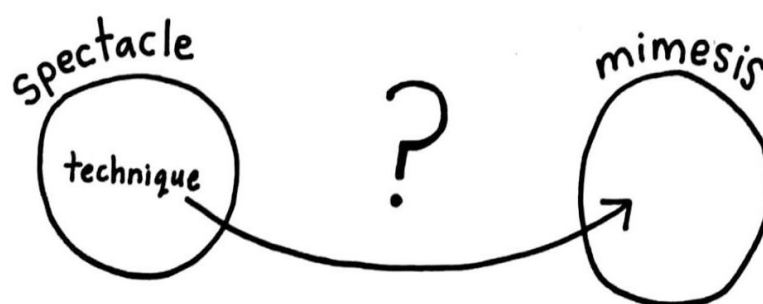
fig. 1

In any case, what should be clear from the preceding account is that the ambiguous status of technique in contemporary circus today does not flow smoothly out of the critique of spectacle, but is rather the product of a specific historical context. Such a narrative gestures towards the urgency of a re-evaluation of technique in contemporary circus, in the interest of reclaiming the potential deflected by the outdated values-judgments of the '70s and '80s, preserved in and and reproduced by the structure of today's circus institutions. The attempt to rescue the circus trick from its erasure at the hands of a logocentric and humanist approach to dramaturgy also has its roots in a practical concern; that is, the mobilization of the existing network of contemporary circus institutions and the re-orientation of its discourse, so that the future of circus production might be different from its past. To such an end, this thesis revolves around imagining the circus trick as an *avowedly technical representation of its own formal particularity*.

0,3 | *A return to the technical*

A return to the technical, and the question of its relation to both form and content, invites an examination of the concept. What exactly does the word 'technique' signify in the discourse of contemporary circus? I would like to pick out three separate referents whose

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7 After Walter Benjamin.

apparent heterogeneity suggests the un-thought content of the word and its centrality to the problem of meaning in circus. Firstly, technique names the procedure circus artists use to safely and successfully execute a certain task. For example: 'first come to stillness in an inverted position, then engage the abdominals, arch, sit up quickly and spot the front wall, dismount the apparatus and land in a standing position….' This is technique as it appears to the circus artist; the technique transmitted by a coach or internalized as a set of directives (*technical process*). Secondly, technique names the class of activity the circus artist is engaged in: trapeze is a technique, or club-juggling, or tight-wire (*technical lineage*). Lastly, technique is the name for the form generated by the technical process—the movement's climax as object of the spectator's gaze (*technical fact*).[8] A circus artist will answer the question, 'what technique do you have in your number?' with a list of technical facts: perhaps '3 one-arm handstands on the left arm, one close-arm handstand in an arch position, a pike-press from L-sit, and a leg balance in a side-scale'. These technical facts are the building blocks of circus work, and appear to the spectator as *forms* inasmuch as they evade reduction to recognizable *actions* through the operation of mimesis (fig.2).

technical lineage ⟶ technical process ⟶ technical fact

fig. 2

The question of the link between these three technicities—in short, the question, 'what is the technical?'— brings us back to Ancient Greece and the birth of the philosophies of knowledge which continue to underpin Western thought. Indeed, the language qualifying the split between technical and epistemic knowledge reveals an originary bias: the technical is distinguished from the epistemic precisely in order to establish a hierarchy whereby the epistemic is privileged. In his 1994 epic *Technics and Time, vol. 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, Bernard Stiegler points to Aristotle's *Physics* as one of the texts that establishes the Western concept of the technical. According to Stiegler, "the separation is determined by a political context, one in which the philosopher accuses the Sophist of instrumentalizing the *logos* […] as both an instrument of power and a renunciation of knowledge" (1998, 1). Aristotle's text asserts that "every natural being […] has within itself a beginning of movement and rest […whereas] not one product of art has the source of its own production within itself" (quoted in Stiegler 1998, 1). In other words, while the epistemic is dispassionate, transcendent, and concerned with Truth, the technical is tarnished by self-interest and instrumentality.

It's easy to see how such an understanding of the technical, whereby the technical is defined primarily by its use, informs the anxious insistence that circus technique 'by itself' is just not good enough. The cultural privilege that the epistemic enjoys over the technical—and the mind, the site of the epistemic, enjoys over the technical body—certainly contributes to the "inferiority complex" that Yohann Floch[9] identifies in the circus world: "in spite of themselves, circus artists have interiorized the idea that it would be less prestigious to work from the body and from movement as opposed to working from thoughts and words" (2012, 111). Accordingly, circus artists research deeply through the body and then proceed to

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[8] The terminology I employ here refers obliquely to Bernard Stiegler's work on 'technics'.

[9] Floch is a freelance cultural consultant who ran the Circostrada network (European Network Circus and Street ArtS) for 8 years. He now works for a variety of cultural initiatives, predominantly in the circus field.

proudly stage the body as a mere channel for the expressive mind. It is difficult to miss the self-defeating inconsistency of such a position.

Contemporary circus dramaturgy, insofar as it replaces the technical, the formal, and the embodied with the narrative and the psychological—insofar as it replaces the fullness and newness of circus tricks with the performance of familiar subjectivities—continually sacrifices circus "to drama, drama to the dramatized, and finally the dramatized—the real in its continual withdrawal—to its concept" (Lehmann 2006, 37). Lehmann asserts that "without freeing ourselves from [the mimetic] model, we will never be able to realize to what extent all that we recognize and feel in life is thoroughly shaped an structured by art" (2006, 37); mimesis conceals the generative potential of performance by positing it as always secondary (temporally and otherwise) to lived experience. But circus artists are well aware that performance *is* in fact lived experience, and indeed that technical research generates new experiences to which neither the spectator nor the performer necessarily has a prior reference point. A non-mimetic approach to circus dramaturgy could harness and disseminate the knowledge produced by and through technicity, instead of (disingenuously) presenting the technical as secondary to the narrative or the psychological.

What is more, a commitment to mimesis and the performance of subjectivity tacitly acquiesces to the Aristotelian denigration of the technical, despite the fact that technical facts in circus tend to emerge *before* their instrumentality has been established. A practical and discursive shift within the field moving away from the logic of mimesis would also work to undermine the ancient definition of the technical, whereby technique always arises out of strict instrumentality: in the case of formally-structured circus performance, the technique comes first, and a multiplicity of contingent instrumentalities fans out in its wake.

A re-valuation of the technical in circus would correspond, on a wider plan, to a shift in the position of the technical in contemporary society. It is worth wondering, after Stiegler, whether the technical can still today be understood as an 'inert milieu', subject to "no form of 'self-causality'" and thus somehow less meaningful or valuable than epistemic knowledge gleaned from the dynamic natural world (Stiegler 1998, 1). After all, at the time when the technical was originally distinguished from the epistemic, technical advances still came about primarily in response to the conditions proposed by nature, and were in that respect properly secondary to nature. We are now, however, witness to a reversal, whereby nature is the shifting and mutable instrument, the tool we use (and abuse) in order to deal with and feed the proliferation of technology (1998, 24). Moreover, it seems impossible today for the philosopher retain his or her distaste for the technical discussion of strategy and tactics, given our state of cultural, economic, political and environmental crisis; in the 21st century, we can no longer afford to relegate the technical—the processual, the contingent, the situationally-embedded—to a merely 'backstage' role. Perhaps it is time to reconsider the nature of the technical. In the context of contemporary circus dramaturgy, such a reconsideration seems of the utmost importance.

0,4 | *Meaning through form: an energetic theatre*

Negativity towards the technical and the embodied forms the obverse of the fetish for the performance of charismatic subjectivity discussed in §0,2. The two forces work in tandem to enable the tendency in the field to conceptualize circus technique as a kind of 'language' providing information about the staged self, rather than an entity which "has the

source of its own production within itself".[10] But the technical process produces new forms, not familiar signs: technical facts refer primarily to themselves. In an effort to dissimulate the self-sufficiency of the technical fact, contemporary circus often cloaks it in gesture, facial expression, and attitude: the language employed by circus-which-tells-stories-about-people is in fact the language of the actor, and in such a framework, the specific form of the technical fact becomes anecdotal. In order to use the technical fact itself—here conceptualized as an essentially *formal* entity—as the structuring element of a dramaturgy, it is important to ask the question of the relation between material substance, form, and content.

At the beginning of *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler introduces (and partially deconstructs) another Aristotelian concept: *schema*. In *de Anima*, Aristotle attacks the senselessness of a metaphysics which conceptualizes the soul and the body as separate or separable from one another, asserting that "it is as meaningless to ask whether the wax and the shape given to it by the stamp [*schema*] are one, or generally the matter [...] of a thing and that of which it is the matter" (Butler 2011, 8). Such a statement is useful in the context of this thesis because it reveals a historico-discursive link between substance, form, and the performance of subjectivity.

Although Aristotle claims to simply dismantle a binary, his comparison appears to the contemporary reader to perform something more complex. For the analogy between a body/soul and a wax/*schema* is far from direct: is the wax's *schema*, abstracted out from the wax-as-substance, analogous to the body, insofar as both terms refer to the shape or form of a raw substance? Or is the wax's *schema* more like a human soul—the name for the whole entity's capacity for affect, its expressivity, its meaning? Given indirect relation of one set of terms to the other, Aristotle's analogy seems in fact to problematize and blur together not two but three distinct conceptual categories: substance (wax or body), form (*schema* or body), and meaning (*schema* or soul).

Butler points out that Aristotle's statement comes across as more straightforward in the Ancient Greek: s*chema* literally means "shape, figure, appearance, dress, gesture, figure of a syllogism, and grammatical form", and Butler links the word to a notion of legibility (2011, 8). The body is thus simultaneously substance, form, and meaning, insofar as it is material and schematic[11]: the word *schema* introduces both form and meaning under the auspices of the same sign. Butler objects to this equivalency inasmuch as it seems to consign form to a certain 'grammar', a set of hard and fast rules delineating the known and thereby creating an excluded outside-of-form. But the concept of *schema*—the union and inseparability of form and content—implies also the possibility of generating previously-unspeakable or even unthinkable contents through formal experimentation. Rather than delineating a constraint, I propose to take Aristotle's discussion of *schema* as a gesture towards the power of form to shift our thinking.

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[10] Tilde Björfors, founder of Cirkus Cirkör: "If knife-throwing is the only way you can express yourself, can you then speak knife-throwing as you speak a language?" (2012, 23). I argue that you cannot speak knife-throwing as you speak a language—as carriers of meaning, knife-throwing and language work in a fundamentally different manner.

[11] Or perhaps insofar as it is material, schematic and *observed*. Aristotle is not concerned with the soul as it appears to itself, no more so than with the shape of the wax seal at is might appear to itself. Rather, Aristotle interrogates the separation of the body and soul, the wax and its *schema*, from the point of view of an interpreting spectator: we might say he takes a *dramaturgical* approach to the study of the soul. He seems to assume the presence of a spectator—indeed, it is by virtue of the spectator's presence that, in one move, the *schema* is discernible as both form and meaning.

Certain commentators from theatre and dance, tracing movements critical of mimetic representation in their own fields, hint at how we might begin to design a dramaturgical practice which allows content (and eventually meaning) to emerge from form. In his seminal survey *Postdramatic Theatre*, theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann explains the 'energetic theatre' proposed by Jean-François Lyotard:

> *Lyotard speaks of a changed idea of theatre that we have to assume in order to be able to conceive of theatre beyond drama. He calls it 'energetic theatre'. This would be a theatre not of meaning, but of 'forces, intensities, present affects' [....] in theatre, gestures, figurations and arrangements are possible that refer to an 'elsewhere' in a different way than iconic, indexical, or symbolic 'signs'. They allude or point towards it and at the same time offer themselves as an effect of a flux, an innervation or rage. Energetic theatre would be theatre beyond representation— meaning, of course, not simply without representation, but not governed by its logic (2006, 37-8).*

In the spirit of this energetic theatre, I hereby take on the task of describing a specificity of the gestures, figurations, and arrangements that characterize circus technique, in order to identify some parameters according to which it generates forces, intensities, and present affects. What is circus technique, not historically but now and in the future? How can we demarcate the field of circus technique in a way that highlights its specificity without turning that specificity into a regularizing constraint, i.e. without discussing technique in terms of what it 'normally' represents? What kind of knowledge does the circus artist generate through technical research,[12] and how does this knowledge appear in circus performance? And finally, to what extent are the vectors of technical research still determined by a certain fidelity to the logic of the mimetic and the spectacular? These sub-questions frame my treatment of the research question central to this thesis: how can we use circus technique as the foundation for both theoretical inquiry and dramaturgical practice in contemporary circus? My intentions in this thesis are threefold: to suggest a certain latent dramaturgical potential in circus technique; to begin to articulate and make speakable the technique-based processes of meaning-making that are already operational in some circus performances, and to model[13] one way that the technical in circus might be conceptualized without being overwritten.

0,5 | *Methodology*

The question of the recuperation of the technical circus body is a slippery one. My research began with a practical engagement—first as an artist, later as a dramaturg—during which time the conflict between circus technique and mimetic dramaturgy continually returned to the fore. Circus artists asked, 'why must we justify the inclusion of tricks in circus work in order for it to be considered art? Is the making a new trick not itself a creative act?' Critics, dramaturgs, and directors asked, 'why is it so difficult to find a good reason to do a backflip?'

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[12] The most common term for the process of finding new tricks in circus.

[13] I say 'model' in that I hope my methodology, as much as my content, can serve as an inspiration. If we want to activate a true critical discourse in contemporary circus, we need not just one viewpoint; we need a constellation. Nevertheless, what is almost totally missing in the field—and what I hope to model here—are perspectives which are contextualized, grounded in the clear articulation of a thought process and therefore open to critique. I look forward to reading rich alternative accounts of circus dramaturgy written with a similar commitment to criticality and transparency.

How to begin to untangle this muddle?

I have no desire to erase circus. Taking the position of the critics, dramaturgs, and directors to its logical conclusion would seem to imply such an erasure, the irreferentiality of the trick eventually pushing it off stage and consigning it to the practice hall. I chose rather to begin with technique and work towards a concept of meaning-making within which the technical fact might find itself fully necessary and accounted for. Importantly, this concept had to circumvent mimesis in favor of something vaguer, less clearly articulable; meaning as a feeling or impression, meaning beyond language—the meaning specific to the form of the technical fact.

Maaike Bleeker's 'Thinking no-one's thought' provided the key which allowed my project to proceed. In the article, she argues for a "re-conceptualization of thought as a process that take place in and through material practice" (2015, 69). In reference to Deleuze and Guattari, Bleeker explains how thought is not transcendent—that is, existing abstractly as a kind of floating ideal—but is rather always medium-specific, instantiated in a material substrate. Thinking happens in language, but it can also happen in movement, in paint, or in stone. The artist who creates circus does not think autonomously; the thought which is materialized in circus work is generated through a negotiation between the artist, her technique, and her physical environment. Thought in circus is thus properly located in that interstitial space (fig.3). Dramaturgy, according to Bleeker, properly concerns the thoughts which emerge *between* the entities[14] in the studio—no *one's* thought, but the thoughts which belong to the process as a whole.
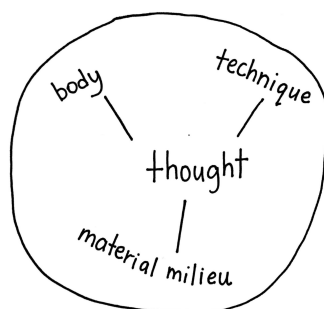
fig. 3

As Bleeker theorizes performance creation, heterogenous materiality is not subjugated by thought-as-language; rather, bodies, objects, and language are encouraged to think together, generating knowledge which emerges through material practice. This approach, whereby the expressivity of the performance is not pre-determined but rather emergent, bypasses the regime of mimetic logic. Bleeker's description of what it means to do dramaturgy in such a framework is therefore essential to the project upon which I have embarked. She identifies two 'points of awareness' around which dramaturgical thought revolves: firstly, an awareness of internal structure and 'emerging potential'; and secondly, an awareness of a range of possible "implications and complications of the material being created": the material as relates to the spectator and a wider context (2015, 68). This approach—first attentive, then reflective—comes close to describing the kind of a dramaturgical strategy I hope to enable with this thesis.

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[14] I choose this word in order not to privilege people over objects or the material over the discursive: the circus studio is populated by human bodies, circus objects, technical processes and lineages, etc....

After Bleeker, I set out here to describe some of the 'directions in which (circus) creation could possibly proceed'. I begin with a close analysis of the conditions under which a staged action is perceived through the lens of the technical, extracting a working definition of circus performance through an examination of the technical fact. I then proceed by exploring the landscape proposed by such a definition, pointing out four continua[15] along which circus technique qualitatively varies, and proposing these as axes along which to map the intensive[16] change staged in circus performance. Finally, I discuss the potential affective implications of such intensive change, bringing meaning in again 'through the back door'.[17]

I have chosen to start with critical and philosophical texts and work my way back to examples from performance and practice. This is because I am trying to articulate the circus trick in the most general way possible, interrogating its basic structure and conditions of appearance, in order that the practical details of its actualization might remain relatively undetermined. In other words, I am interested in circus as a generative process and a mode of looking at performance, rather than a set of evaluative criteria establishing a normative frontier beyond which circus becomes 'too experimental'. Writers who begin with circus performance and then try to construct theoretical unities tend to either throw their hands in the air in frustration ("I think that there has never been, that there is not, and that there will never be an essence of circus or any firm, unique, and consensual definition of it." Guy 2012, 43) or draw the boundaries of the idiom so tightly that the new is categorically excluded ("MY CIRCUS COMPASS: WEIRD / RIDICULE / RISK / WONDERFUL," Gulko 2012, 72). By beginning with circus as a concept and then exploring the way such a concept informs—but does not fully define—a variety of practices and performances, I intend to propose an open specificity for circus, enabling critical discourse but not constraining the expansion of the form beyond well-trodden territories.

Underpinning this investigation is a commitment to the theoretical and analytical tools offered by New Materialism, as well as the ethical project of its proponents. New Materialism names a contemporary trend in philosophical thinking which aims to destabilize both Cartesian dualism (which favors mind over body) and Kantian 'correlationism'[18] (which favors subject over object). Instead, New Materialists highlight the way discourse and subjectivity emerge from and persist through presence in objective, material substrates; and likewise, the way language and culture perform real and persistent transformations in the world of bodies and things. New Materialism therefore provides a host of concepts which we can use to think circus technique not only from the perspective of discourse, but also from

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[15] See §4,1 for a concise presentation of these continua.

[16] Terminology that materialist philosophy has borrowed from physics. Extensive properties relate to space (height, mass, volume) while intensive properties define an object's quality (color, density, temperature). Another way of thinking about it: if you split something in half, its extensive properties are halved, but its intensive properties generally remain unchanged—except in the case of an intensive property immanent to something's wholeness, which on the contrary will disappear completely (DeLanda 2010, 115-116).

[17] Meaning is here conceptualized not as referential content, but rather as a targeted feeling of destabilization resulting from a perceived object's intensive differing over time.

[18] "For the correlationist the world is only ever the world *for thought* or the experience of a subject. The existence of things in themselves, independent of their relationship to the thinking or experiencing subject, is either bracketed as inaccessible or dismissed as fiction [... Despite] significant and telling departures from Kant, postwar thought nonetheless reproduced the *structure* of his position, maintaining that the real is accessible only as mediated by discourse or—the more Hegelian position—as constituted by it" (Cox et. al. 2015, 17-18). Correlationism is a term coined by Quentin Meillassoux.

the perspective of material process. Accordingly, I have nourished my interpretation of technicity in circus with readings of Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Brian Massumi, Jane Bennett, Steven Shaviro, and Manuel DeLanda's materialist theories. Bernard Stiegler and Boyan Manchev, whose thinking remains closer to the post-Structuralist orthodoxy, also make an appearance: their theories of technicity approach New Materialism in their insistent problematization of the boundary between the body and its prosthetic supplements.

This thesis is itself the result of a material process, set in motion by my embodied history, catalyzed by an institution, and bounded in space and time. Accordingly, I admit to certain shortcomings, symptomatic of the entanglement of knowledge and the conditions of its production. Spatial constraints (geographical) have limited my contact with circus work, confining my discussion to the small percentage of performances I have been privileged enough to access. Space likewise posed a problem as my thought began to overflow the word count imposed by my institutional context, forcing me sometimes to condense complex thoughts into quick paragraphs, sometimes to forego elaboration in favor of suggestion. Time occasionally prevented my engagement with primary sources in their full complexity— commentators provided systematized approaches to the thought of Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari, permitting me to activate their thinking without getting lost in philosophical hermeneutics.

Some might take issue with the temporality of this project in a different regard. Because I have chosen to engage with circus performance from a strongly theoretical standpoint, and because the object of my interest is more potentiality than actuality, my thinking is infected with a certain futurity with respect to the state of contemporary circus today. For those who wish to be dogmatic about Theatre Studies, this thesis might appear speculative, even presumptuous. But I have done my best to avoid prescriptivity, sticking close to the reality of circus practice even while suggesting discursive strategies by which normative and limitative approaches to the form might be overthrown. Rather than overwrite circus practice, I choose to underwrite it. I hope that this thesis can begin to establish circus as a fertile site for embodied reflection, supported by a theoretical discourse designed to give space to the unspeakable.

1: A genitive definition of the technical fact

1,1 | *Performing technicity*

I would like to discuss circus technique theoretically and in general. To do so, I am faced with the sensitive task of demarcating a certain territory within which a staged action can be said to be circus, without at the same time imposing theoretical limits on artistic freedom. My intention is therefore to describe circus technique from the point of view of process, in order to leave the details of the performance (the 'product') radically undefined; imagine, rather than a set of borders beyond which the artist cannot step, a central point or node around which existing work is already organized, and from which new work might pour forth unhindered. The future of circus demands a definition serving as "*carte et non pas calque*" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 20).[1]

To that end, I would like to return to Bernard Stiegler's work on technics. Following the early 20th-century anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan, Stiegler proposes a revision of the Aristotelian concept of the technical. In *Technics and Time*, the technical does not emerge purely in response to a dilemma, or in order to pursue a concrete goal. Rather, Stiegler understands the technical as a kind of persistent[2] layer mediating between the human and her environment. Stiegler quotes Leroi-Gourhan, who writes that "the human group assimilates its milieu *through a curtain of [technical] objects*" (1998, 57; emphasis mine); technique and technical objects facilitate our access to the material world, but also filter and determine that access. Although these 'objects' appear to us as solutions, in some ways they also determine what we consider a problem, insofar as the technical milieu defines a certain horizon of possibility.

Technicity is the product of the human's *self-exteriorization*—the codification or making-objective of her relations to her environment. When Stiegler equates techniques and *prosthetics*, he does so in order to emphasize the sense in which they are both determining with respect to her being-in-the-world *and* separable from her in their objectivity.[3] For example, as 20th century theory has tirelessly emphasized, language is not neutral with respect to subjectivity, profoundly affecting our experience of being. At the same time, each language has a certain objectivity, an exteriority *qua* the body, which allows it to persist even as some or other of its speakers fall silent, and which permits the project of linguistic analysis in the first place.

Stiegler writes primarily about actual technical objects: plows, arrows, flint. In the context of circus performance, technique is of course not concretized in an object, but rather appears as a codified process. Nevertheless, technical processes and technical objects can be understood as modally different manifestations of the same essential phenomenon. Both tools and techniques are epigenetic supplements which intervene in the way the human as a (hypothetically) purely biological being might have acted in and towards a purely natural world. Technics is the objective 'denaturalization' of the human animal, regardless of the

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[1] "A map and not a model" (translation my own). *Calque* actually refers to tracing paper, but 'tracing' would be a misleading translation.

[2] Persistent over time. In this way, according to Stiegler, technicity establishes the temporal continuity that allows culture and subjectivity to emerge. Techniques and technical objects handed down over time serve to call historical modes of dealing with the world into presence, acting as a kind of materialized cultural memory.

[3] "[...] speech is already a prosthesis" (Stiegler 1998, 118)

material substrate in which its objectivity is instantiated.[4] We can thus define the technical as the non-living membrane of procedures and procedural objects mediating a human body's interaction with the world (fig. 4).
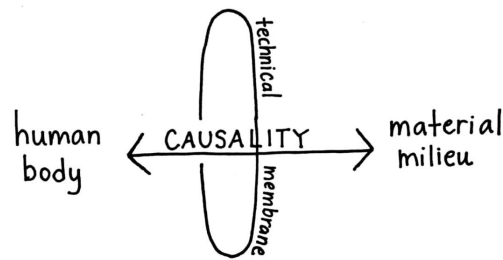

fig. 4

In this expanded conceptualization of the term, almost everything suddenly appears as technical: accordingly, Stiegler asserts that "All human action has something to do with *tekhné,* is after a fashion *tekhné*" (1998, 94) . What, then, prompts a spectator to understand swinging trapeze performance primarily through the lens of the technical—in the sense of artificial, mediated, or 'prosthetic' action—whereas the technique underwriting and determining a performance of language or a performance of etiquette appears unremarkable, a behavior 'natural' to the polite subject of speech?

Technicity does not reveal itself as technical onstage through its real riskiness or difficulty. Circus has gained a reputation for its proximity to death, but the notion that circus is above all a stage for the truly dangerous a misleading one, held over from the days of traditional spectacle and kept alive by romantic attempts to cast the circus artist as noble hero.[5] Paul Bouissac, a Canadian semiotician with an interest in traditional circus, devotes an entire article to what he calls 'modalization': the means by which technical facts in circus are "*made to rank* on a scale of feasibility" (2016, 40; emphasis mine). The perception of difficulty in circus performance does not follow directly from the technique itself; circus skills "are not *simply performed* but are *staged* as being easy, difficult, dangerous, or even insane with respect to normal standards" (2016, 40; emphasis mine).[6] What Bouissac highlights is that technique does not inherently express its own feasibility: the impression of riskiness in circus is carried through by theatrical elements added on top of the technique. It follows that a definition of circus technique which hinges on risk, danger, or difficulty prescribes not the *what* of circus technique but rather the *how* of its staging, imposing a conservative and limiting norm.

Circus performance in which the artist declines to modalize her technique—a move typical of contemporary circus work—circumvents expressions of risk or difficulty while remaining thematically technical, especially in disciplines for which the spectator has little

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[4] "Denaturalization will be self-exteriorization, the becoming self-dependent, self-alienation, the alienation of the originary, the authentic, in the factical, the technical, the artificial death constitutive of the mediacy of a social and differentiated world" (Stiegler 1998, 114)

[5] Jugglers are not obviously more at risk of injury than dancers, nor is juggling objectively 'more difficult' than piano-playing or delivering a Shakespearean monologue. Nevertheless, juggling is and remains primarily technical, while in music and theatre, the technicity of the action fades into the background.

[6] "[…. In circus, all] actions performed are obviously possible. But their staging can make their goal appear more or less within reach of a normal human being" (Bouissac, 2016, 40).

experiential reference.[7] What, then, causes the spectator to perceive circus performance as markedly technical; that is to say, mediated by an objective or prosthetic procedure? I would like to propose non-normativity[8] as key to the operation by which circus technique appears as technical. While the true difficulty or riskiness of a circus trick is accessible exclusively to the performer herself, communicable to the spectator only through theatrical modalization, circus technique is directly *unusual,* with or without being staged as such.[9] Our normative technical membrane (modes of looking, procedures of health and hygiene, linguistic / imagistic / corporeal literacy etc…) has been naturalized, its mediational ontology largely erased from our daily experience. But the circus artist's technique enters the realm of anomaly: she deals with her material environment in a remarkable way, and so her relation to her external milieu appears thematically *mediated*, i.e. technical. Circus is therefore *the performance of unusual relations between bodies and their material environments.*

1,2 | *The technical fact is immanent to the technical assemblage*

Technical facts (see §0,3) are hybrid entities, made up of matter and discourse, life and non-life, past and present. They are heterogenous assemblages, composed wholes. This goes as much for a screwdriver—the kind of technical fact Stiegler writes about—as it does for a triple back-somersault: both emerge at the intersection of matter, culture, and force, and as assemblages, both instantiate properties absent in their component parts.

The screwdriver, for example, results from a combination of metals, manufacturing technologies, organic polymers, economic forces, physical forces, human ambition, human managerial skills, crude oil, etc…, just as the technical fact in circus springs forth from the confluence of a body, school-coach-student power structures, information technology permitting rapid sharing of video footage, networks of desire, a material milieu, a series of internalized instructions, a wider institutional and economic context, a partial knowledge of circus history, influences from other artistic fields, and so forth.[10] The formal properties and instrumental capacities of both the circus trick and the screwdriver surpass the properties and capacities of its parts: neither a set of internalized instructions, nor a network of desire, nor a material milieu, nor a body 'alone' can manifest the form of a triple back-somersault.

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[7] Handstands, for example, create an impression of 'floating' for spectators who have not tried themselves to balance inverted on one arm. Contemporary hand-balancers tend not to emphasize the difficulty of their performance, preferring to appear more abstractly formal / technical.

[8] See §3,1 for a discussion of the normative.

[9] Such a proposal has precedent in the circus world. Circus historian Helen Stoddart, looking back at an earlier era—the era of freaks and curiosities—asserts that circus "finds a pure satisfaction in anomaly which is seen as a delight and an end in itself" (2016, 24). In the context of contemporary circus, Flemish circus artist Alexander Vantournhout uses the word *merkwaardigheid* (something like 'remarkability') to describe the specificity of circus action. Johann le Guillerm's definition of circus—"*un attroupement autour d'un phénomène minoritaire*" ('a gathering surrounding a minority phenomenon')—also speaks to the centrality of other-ness in circus performance (Vantournhout spoke at the 'First encounter on artistic research in circus,' organized by KASK School of Arts, University College Ghent [January 2016]. Circus dramaturg Bauke Lievens quoted le Guillerm at the same event).

[10] The appearance of permanence which accrues to the screw driver and seems to aspectually differentiate it from the circus trick is the result of our naturalized anthropocentric time-scale: from a geological or astrophysical perspective, neither the triple-back nor the screwdriver lasts more than an instant.

This phenomenon, by which a certain novel unity emerges from the movement of composition drawing particular parts into a particular relation, is called *immanence*.[11]

A spectator observing circus tricks staged outside the confines of mimetic logic witnesses precisely three types of parts entering into and subsequently withdrawing from constitutive relations: human bodies, techniques, and material objects / milieux. These are the three compositional components of the collective entity I call the *technical assemblage* (fig. 5). In the example of a handstand-on-canes, the body of the performer and the set of handstand canes begin as two separate entities, united only by the spectator's gaze. When the performer kicks up into a handstand on the canes, however, the two entities enter into an unusual relation; so unusual, in fact, that the externality of the procedure mediating between the performer and her canes is thematized and a third component—the technical process—is revealed / implied. At the same time, the technical fact—the handstand itself, the unique form immanent to the constitutive relation of its parts—emerges. While the handstand persists, it both enables and constrains its parts: each part is enabled to the extent that it expresses the immanent properties of the handstand, but each part also 'agrees' to constrain its activity to within a certain range in exchange for participation (the handbalancer agrees not relax completely, for example). When she descends from her canes, the spectator witnesses the decomposition of the technical fact, and its components' capacity to enter into other kinds of relations (the body enters into relation with the music, the canes with a beam of light, the technique with the imagination of the spectator, etc...).
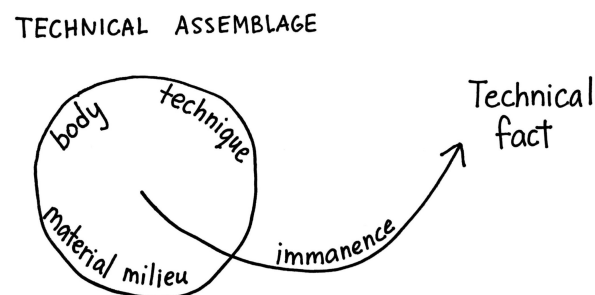
TECHNICAL ASSEMBLAGE

fig. 5

The movements of the technical assemblage described above are typical of Deleuzian assemblages.[12] We might add one further specification to this description. Deleuze and Guattari describe two different kinds of collective entities: assemblages and *strata* (fig. 6). A stratum is a strongly territorialized, strongly coded individual; that is to say, its frontiers are emphatic, and its internal causal relations are mostly top-down (the whole determines the actions of its parts). They use to word 'assemblage'—in French, *agencement*—to denote the

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[11] My understanding of immanence comes from Deleuze and Guattari through the essays of Manuel DeLanda, one of today's most prominent Deleuzian scholars (2010).

[12] As described by DeLanda in his 2010 essays, 'Assemblages and Human History' and 'Metallic Assemblages.' In order to avoid a logical fallacy whereby wholes (America) are reducible to simply the sum of the actions and properties of its parts (Americans); or whereby parts (Americans) are entirely determined by the character of their unity (America)—positions termed micro- and macro-reductionism—DeLanda emphasizes both the concept of immanence and the concept of *relations of exteriority* (by which "parts retain a relative autonomy, so that they can be detached from one whole and plugged into another one entering into new interactions"; 2010, 4). Stated differently, with regards to assemblage "causality operates in two directions at once: the bottom-up effect of the parts on the whole, and the top-down effect of the whole on its parts [...] *constraining them and enabling them*" (2010, 68-9).

opposite set of qualities: *agencements* contain parts which are markedly heterogenous, whose unity is more the mark of a "co-functioning", a "symbiosis" or a "sympathy" than of a rigid, stratified co-dependence (Deleuze quoted in DeLanda 2010, 10).
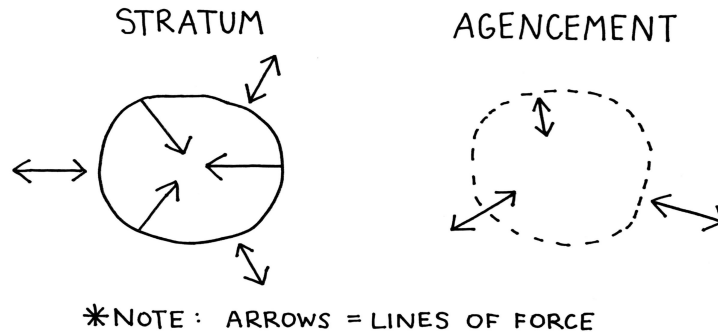

fig. 6

In the work of Deleuze and Guattari, however, binary oppositions are typically drawn in order that they might later be problematized. Following DeLanda, I propose to understand strata and assemblages as different *phases*[13] of the same basic figuration. As the components of collective entities are de-coded and deterritorialized, those entities become more assemblage-like, less like strata, and vice-versa. DeLanda therefore proposes to use the original French term '*agencement*' to invoke the proper Deleuzian concept of assemblage, and the word 'assemblage' to refer to collective entities more generally (DeLanda 2010, 10-11). In this thesis, I will take DeLanda's suggestion, as it is precisely this phase shift—the transformation from *agencement* into stratum and back again—which circus technique stages.

When an aerialist enters the ring and stands beside her tissu, the gaze of the spectator already constructs a loosely-organized *agencement*. The performer's body and her apparatus are stitched together, understood as a unity, by virtue of appearing in the same visual field. But she and her tissu are not yet determined by their unity; they are an alliance more than an individual, co-informing but not co-defining. When she begins to climb, the tissu-body assemblage qualitatively changes; the movements of both body and object are more directly linked, and the presence of an objective technical process begins to become clear. At this stage, the assemblage's degree of territorialization is markedly increased, but not 'maximized', in the sense that both body and object still enjoy a certain degree of freedom. The performer's body appears only partially in-formed by her relation to the object (by her technique): she remains able to engage in some normative life-behaviors (speaking or singing, smiling or grimacing, pulling off a fake eyelash, and so forth), while being deprived of other possibilities (for example, jumping or doing a push-up). To follow DeLanda's analogy to material phase shift, this in-between stage might be considered a kind

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[13] "[...] distinguishing between different *kinds* of wholes (strata in general, assemblages in general) may open the back door for reified generalities to infiltrate a materialist ontology. To avoid this danger we can use a single term and build into it 'control knobs' (or more technically, parameters) that can have different settings at different times: for some settings the social whole would be a stratum, for other settings an assemblage [....] parameters specify the environmental factors that affect the object [....] while for many values of a parameter like temperature only a quantitative change will be produced, at critical points a body of water will spontaneously change *qualitatively*, abruptly transforming from a liquid to a solid form, or from a liquid to a gas form" (DeLanda 2010, 11).

of gel, neither as free-flowing as a true *agencement* nor as solid as a stratum. When finally she manifests a technical fact, the assemblage is stratum-like to the extent that it fully determines the actuality of her body, her apparatus, and her technique in the eyes of the spectator. What are actual possibilities for her in daily life seem consigned to the realm of virtual potentiality for the duration of the technical fact's presence.

Of course, most circus tricks fall somewhere on a continuum from the strongly stratified to the weakly *agencé*. As suggested in §1,1, it is not territorialization but (non-normative) technicity which conditions the emergence of the technical fact as such. Nevertheless, the technical fact might be said to be more strongly actual to the extent that it approaches stratification.[14] I would therefore like to point toward *relative degree of territorialization* as one variable parameter by which circus tricks come to appear qualitatively different, one from the other. Following quite naturally from the adoption of a non-instrumental approach to technicity and the assemblage ontology that Stiegler's theory of the technical implies, I propose to begin our foray into dramaturgy-as-cartography by plotting *the aspectual change in the technical assemblage over time on a scale extending between agencement and stratum* (fig. 7).
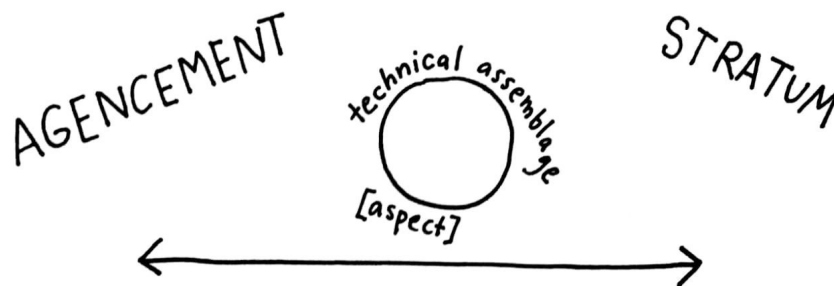

fig. 7

1,3 | *What becomes of the circus body?*

Why is such a schematization useful in the context of making and understanding meaning in non-mimetic contemporary circus? I have proposed that 'immanence' names the operation which allows the technical fact to emerge as a unique form in the eyes of the spectator, and territorialization as the parameter dictating the relative co-dependence of its parts. This, in turn, suggests a dramaturgy fundamentally structured by movements of composition and decomposition between non-living matter, biological matter, and objects of discourse (technical process / lineage). It also allows a certain re-reading of the problematics of circus as the performance of personality, character, and humanistic narrative.

In her 2015 'First Open Letter to the Circus', circus dramaturg and researcher Bauke Lievens frames the conflict between circus technique and narrative in terms of a conflict between presence and representation: "circus acts always interrupt the narrative," she asserts; "It is simply not possible to combine the two in one smooth whole. At the moment of physical danger (of presence), the story (the re-presentation) simply stops" (2015, 5).

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[14] The more the parts of the assemblage appear constrained by their participation, the less we see the individual parts and the more we see the technical fact as a totality. Stratification strongly actualizes the emergence of the technical fact as an immanent wholeness. Which is not to say that this wholeness is fully available to our perceptive / reflective faculties; indeed one might assert that, in its paradigmatic instance, the technical fact performs a double movement, whereby it simultaneously appears as a whole and slips beyond our ability to fully grasp its wholeness, refusing to be pinned down, named, abstracted, or emptied of its specificity (see §§1,3 ; 2.3 ; 3,1).

Lievens implies that the danger posed to the real performer cuts through the artifice of the theatrical situation and highlights the falseness of her represented character.[15] In light of my brief discussion of the 'dangerous ontology of circus hypothesis' (§1,1), several aspects of her statement seem to demand revision. Nevertheless, the movement Lievens describes—by which circus technique conjures a presence which interrupts, intrudes-upon or otherwise slices through states of affairs, overshadowing or absenting what had previously stood in its place—rings true in the context of a dramaturgy of assemblage.

In *Anti-Oedipus,* Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that in order to account for the relative independence of the assembled parts of an emergent whole—in order that each part retains the possibility of entering into relations of exteriority—it is essential that we consider the immanent entity to be something on the order of "*a new part fabricated separately*" (1977, 42; emphasis mine). Using a spatial metaphor, they locate emergent entities "*alongside* [their] various separate parts" (1977, 42; emphasis mine). What Deleuze and Guattari's insistence on the peripheral ontology of assemblages implies is that the technical fact, understood as immanent to its parts, stands *beside* its parts. It is something fundamentally *other* with respect to the technical process, the material milieu, and—crucially—the normatively-governed body.

Accordingly, I would like to rephrase Lievens' assertion: at the moment of the emergence of technically-mediated form (the presence of the technical fact), the story (the legibility of the body *qua* the body of a subject) simply stops—or at least fades momentarily into the background. It is not the dangerous 'reality' of the technical fact that cancels the representation of a fictional narrative, but rather the alterity of technical fact with regards to the participating human being which suddenly cuts her mimetic performance of personality short and blurs our access to her as the object of personal identification.

To the extent that the technical assemblage approaches stratification, the circus body is constrained in its normative performance of self. Posture, locomotion, vocalization, facial expressivity; one by one, the channels by which the artist represents herself as a charismatic, relatable, and empathetic subject are co-opted by the technical fact. Even weakly-territorialized technical assemblages complicate the spectator's access to the performer's psyche as implied through participation in a mimetic economy of sameness: insofar as the intersection of body, technique, and material milieu is grasped as a specific and anomalous unity, that unity appears to both partially-erase and strangely *double* its components. Territorialization determines the intensity of that doubling / erasure: if the technical fact functions as a kind of prismatic lamination, co-extensive with its parts but not identical to them, then territorialization regulates that lamination's relative opacity.

With such an optical analogy, I echo Peta Tait's article on the phenomenology of circus spectatorship, 'Ecstasy and visceral flesh in motion' (2016). Tait invokes Merleau-Ponty's perceptive 'opaque zones' to conceptualize the withdrawal of the circus body at the moment when the technical fact emerges (fig. 8). Referring specifically to aerial performance, Tait's investigation follows circus bodies "moving in and out of mindful, reflective spaces" as their technical investment draws them beyond the domain of the

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[15] Lievens proposes a tragic understanding of circus performance, whereby circus performers "attempt to overcome some physical limit [which is] always moving to be just out of reach" (2015, 7): the acrobat manages to defy gravity, but only momentarily, etc.... Circus action, however, only reads as tragic if the spectator is given to identify with the acrobat as a desiring subject, and the trick as her fleeting moment of *jouissance*. While a body is always legible to the extent that it expresses a certain form, it need not be psychologized in the way Lievens suggests. Tragedy is not possible unless we use theatrical means to suggest the psychic life of the body on stage—an affair separate from the technical fact taken as a self-reflexive image.

spectator's thinkable (2016, 306).[16] Interestingly, Tait explicitly equates the space of reflection with the space of linguistic representability: "I watch aerialists with attention which jumps and flickers, but which *shatters and splinters in the attempt to describe them*" (2016, 299; emphasis mine). We can thusly begin to understand the significative (read: dramaturgical) consequences of the material process which produces the technical fact.

OPAQUE ZONE

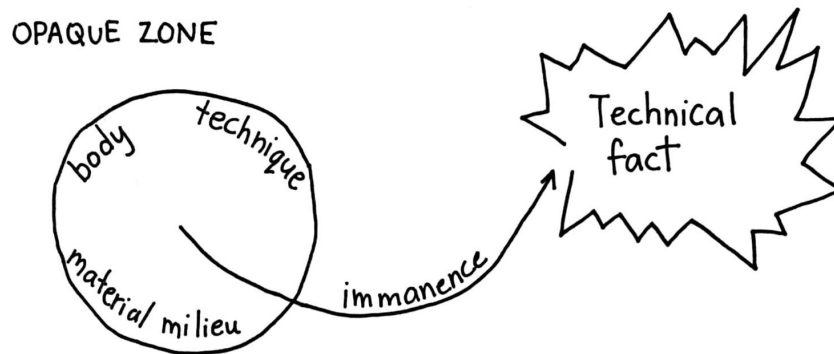body technique

material milieu

immanence

Technical fact

fig. 8

Tait's characterization of the technical assemblage's flickering contraction-dilation as a movement in and out of language recasts Lievens'—and my own—concerns about the non-referentiality of circus technique as a latent dramaturgical potential. Circus bodies are not themselves non-signifying, but rather oscillate between legibility / referentiality / generality and opacity / reflexivity / specificity in a process occasioned by the technical assemblage's change over time *qua* degree of territorialization. In other words, first we see a subject, then we see a trick, and then the subject re-appears: the citational body shifts disconcertingly in an out of the spectator's purview as the technical assemblage is composed and decomposed.

Thus, circus performance stages a kind of escape from mimesis. We have only to cast a glance at the field of choreography—and especially at the activity of so-called 'conceptual dance' in the '90s and early 2000s—to understand the political ramifications of such an escape. As André Lepecki points out in *Exhausting Dance*, the systems of meaning which ground the economy of mimesis produce and reproduce "discursive and performative forms of domination" (2006, 46). Mimetic representation functions to reinforce and propagate the known—the hegemonic inside of representation—at the expense of the not-yet-known and not-yet-thinkable: "the end of representation is the limit of its capacity to turn presence into a fixed, recognizable subjectivity" (2006, 49). As a project of political liberation, Lepecki insists on a continued experimentation with and revelation of the frontiers of mimesis, as a means of problematizing reified equivalences between "visibility and presence, presence and unity of form, unity of form and identity" (2006, 46).

Clearly, circus performs just such an exploration: circus bodies slip out of referentiality through insisting on unusual relations with the the material world. Circus technique does not only imply a critique of mimesis, but also proposes a very specific escape route beyond it: the key to the circus body's liberation lies in a kind of hybridization with the object(ive). In the next section of this thesis, I will explore the object, giving voice to the circus body's hitherto-voiceless partner in an attempt to shed some light on the way it functions in the technical assemblage.

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[16] "A spectator's capacity to see aerial action might be finely tuned by his or her prior experience of moving and seeing other moving bodies" (Tait 2016, 306).

2: Listening to the call of the material milieu

2,1 | *Common notions: the body as object of thing-power*

      In the previous section, I described the territorialization of the technical assemblage as a movement of *composition*. Starting from the elements of the assemblage and working towards the emergence of a technical fact, we are witness to the generation of new formal configurations, which overflow the closed system of generality and alikeness grounding the economy of mimesis. As Lehmann asserts, an escape from the bonds of the mimetic permits the artist to understand herself not imitator but co-creator of the real, to the extent that her work invents "perceptive images and differentiated worlds of affects and feelings that did not exist in this way before or outside of their artistic representation" (2006, 37). Such a description begs the question: if circus can be conceptualized as a *generative* rather than an *imitative* genre of performance, then what sorts of lived experience does it generate? How might we understand circus performance as a site of knowledge production?

      Building on the compositional ontology outlined in chapter one, I would like to examine the notion of composition and the conditions under which constructive relationality becomes possible, in order to explore one way we might cash out the idea of circus as knowledge production. Through a Spinozan lens—and with special attention to contemporary Spinozan ecosopher, Jane Bennett—I will propose technical research as negotiation with the material milieu, and circus training as a process of sensitization. When considering the role material non-life plays in determining the technical fact, composition emerges as the opposite of *imposition*: the technical body does not impose itself unilaterally upon its material milieu, but rather acts in deeply sensitive accordance with the particular properties and capacities which the circus apparatus or environment instantiates. Instead of staging and promoting strong-willed mastery in the modernist mode, we can understand circus as a genitive site for what Bennett calls "healthy and enabling instrumentalizations" (2010, 40), rehearsing new paradigms of *mutual use* which eschew exploitation in favor of the reciprocal expansion of potentiality.

      In order to make sense of such a claim, let us take a look at the metaphysics of 18th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza's work lies at the heart of the contemporary materialist and anti-humanist projects. Long before Structuralism, Spinoza contradicted the modernist centrality of the rational human subject; he was in favor of a more nuanced picture, in which the subject is *produced* by forces operating at the level of the sub-, intra-, and extra-personal. Spinoza understood all objects in the universe (the *modes*) as collections of parts (what Deleuze will later call assemblages). Each mode is unified under the auspices of a *constitutive relation* or *essence*. So in a Spinozan metaphysics, each individual's specificity is not defined by her substance, but rather by the characteristic way she organizes her component parts (fig. 9),[1] and each individual's development is determined primarily by her encounters with other modes: "When a body 'encounters' another body [...] it happens that the two relations sometimes combine to form a more powerful whole, and sometimes one decomposes the other, destroying the cohesion of its parts" (Deleuze 1970, 19).

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[1] Deleuze explains Spinozan ontology: "[...] each body in extension, each idea or each mind in thought, are constituted by the characteristic relations that subsume the parts of the body, the parts of that idea" (Deleuze 1970, 19). Throughout this thesis, I have chosen to reference Deleuze's book on Spinoza rather than going to the original, as Deleuze emphasizes the aspects of Spinozism most relevant to Deleuze's own thinking. This slight bias makes it simpler to deploy the thought of both men in one discussion. All quotes in this thesis from *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* are Deleuze's formulations of Spinoza's theories, unless specified otherwise.
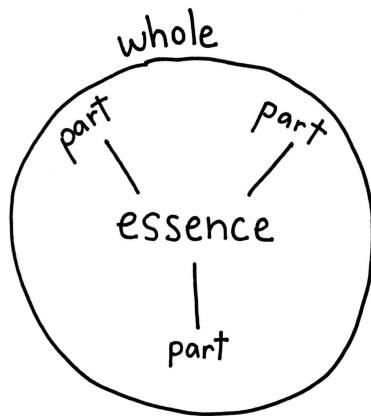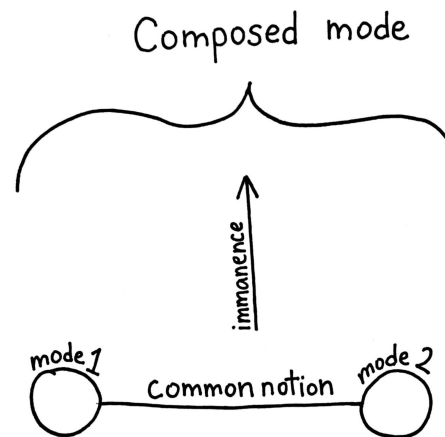
fig. 9

fig. 10

Such a metaphysics is strongly concordant with the assemblage theory of circus technique laid out in chapter one. If we understand the technical fact to be the immanent specificity or essence of a collection of parts (the body, the technique, and the material milieu) in the context of a certain spatial and energetic configuration (the encounter), Spinoza's thought permits us to inquire more specifically into the process of composition itself—an inquiry essential to the development of a sophisticated circus dramaturgy, and one which eventually reveals the generative power of circus research.

Circus artists investigate and reveal the possibilities of composition between bodies and material. Spinoza calls these possibilities the *common notions* (fig. 10): objects compound with one another through commonality and agreement, and a common notion is therefore "the idea of something in common between two or more bodies that [...] affect each other in keeping with this intrinsic agreement or composition" (Deleuze 1970, 44-45).[2] In other words, the terms of the relation into which parts enter must be affirmed by the properties and capacities already expressed by the constitutive relation of each part. If not— if the parts do not have the capacity to come into agreement, to affect one another—they either pass by one another unwittingly (the case of the blind man and the Mona Lisa) or one comes into agreement with certain parts of the other in such a way that its constitutive relation is decomposed (the case of the man, his blood, and poison).

Thus, action is not only the action of a willing, self-sustaining subject, but rather something shared by the subject and the object, located essentially *between* (fig. 11). The particularity of any action depends on a subject's sensitivity to a certain commonality held between her and the object: the trampolinist cannot bounce without the presence of something to be bounced-upon, nor does the possibility of bouncing present itself without sensitivity to potential bouncy-ness. We can best describe the action impersonally, as a

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[2] "All bodies, even those that do not agree with one another (for example, a poison and the body that is poisoned), have something in common: extension, motion, and rest [....] But it is never *through* what they have in common that they disagree" (Deleuze 1970, 55). Elsewhere: "*there are always relations that agree with one another* (for example, the agreement between a poison and the new relations into which the parts of the blood enter). But relations that agree, according to the natural order, do not necessarily coincide with the preservation of a *particular* relation, which may be dissolved" (1970, 33). So in a way, Spinoza proposes an exclusively *compositional* ontology, whereby movements of decomposition turn out to only be the negative image of a composition happening elsewhere.

bouncing, a gerundive unity characterizing the terms on which agency is *exchanged* between two entities—in this case, between a subject and an object.[3]

fig. 11

What if we conceptualize the action of the circus body not as the primary or only cause of the technical fact, but also as an *effect* of the material milieu, the response to a silent call? In such a case, we can talk about the technical fact as revelatory not only of the body and what it wants, but also of the object and what *it* 'wants'. Obviously, agency in this context has little to do with subjectivity, consciousness, or desire as it is understood in everyday discourse.[4] But despite the semantic strangeness involved in attributing 'willing' to non-life, the circus artist is instinctively well-acquainted with the will of her apparatus: often, new technical processes present themselves physically before they can be conceptualized, the body and the object coming together in unexpected ways through the artist's strategic *relaxation* of agentic force.[5] In circus, the abstract notion of *thing-power*[6] becomes a tangible and practical reality: the circus body acts "differently according to the objects encountered [... and therefore] is, at every moment, *determined by the affections that come from the objects*" (Deleuze 1970, 21; emphasis mine).

We can bring such an understanding of agency to bear on circus dramaturgy through the introduction of another dramaturgical parameter, this time concerning the apparent distribution of agency among the elements of the technical assemblage. How much does the body appear to dominate the object? To what extent is the specificity of the composition shaped by a technical discourse? When does the object itself appear to call the body into action, to dictate the details of the technique? And what do such movements of composition reveal about bodies, objects, and objects of discourse? Using Spinozan terminology, we can

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[3] The simple gerund form is adequate in the case of bouncing, as the verb 'to bounce' refers ambiguously to both the bouncing subject and the subject which makes another bounce. We come up against the limits of a contingent grammar when attempting to describe other actions in the same way. For example, how might we construct an impersonal gerundive for climbing / being climbed?

[4] It is something rather closer to the Spinozan *conatus*, the raw effort by which each thing "strives to persevere in its being, each body in extension, each mind or each idea in thought" (Deleuze 1970, 21). See also Deleuze and Guattari's use of the term '*desiring machine'* instead of 'assemblage' in their early collaboration, *Anti-Oedipus* (Massumi 1992, 82). In Deleuze and Guattari, an assemblage is held together by a force of desire divorced from any notion of subjectivity.

[5] For example, a tight-wire walker might purposefully throw herself off-balance in order to see what emerges in the process of fighting to stay on the wire; an aerial-hoop artist might grab at a new height on her hoop without knowing exactly how the change will affect her movement, but in the spirit of experimentation and 'letting the hoop decide'.

[6] Contemporary materialist philosopher Jane Bennett's term for agency divorced from subjectivity.

call this parameter *the affection of each element of the assemblage on a continuum stretching between passion and action* (fig. 12).[7]
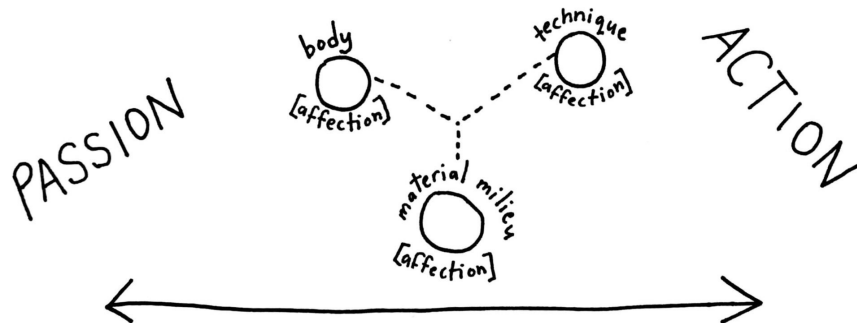

fig. 12

What kind of effect does such a problematization of the site of agency have on the spectator? We humans are used to thinking of ourselves as the final cause of our own actions (Spinoza's *illusion of final causes*) and of our action as essentially free (the *illusion of free decrees*).[8] Circus which plays with non-living agency, by contrast, thematizes the action which occurs *in between* (living and non-living) bodies, challenging the spectator's tendency to understand material affections as instead final causes, emanating from deep within a pure and true human self. Such work begins to awaken in the spectator the capacity to think in terms of composition rather than imposition, empowering her in her "effort to select and organize good encounters, that is, encounters with modes that […] inspire us with joyful passions" (1970, 55-56)—the effort which Spinoza calls the activity of Reason itself. In this sense, circus produces certain new ways of thinking and understanding one's relation to the other, living or non-living.

2,2 | Gangewifre *and the ethics of vital materialism*

We can see the agentic parameter strongly at play in circus work which thematizes the specificity of the object, environment or milieu with which the artist constructs an unusual, technical relation: the surreal scenographic work of Zimmermann & de Perrot, for instance, or the futuristic landscapes *mis-en-scène* by Aurélien Bory (Compagnie 111). Because of the pared-down nature of the piece, Ilmatila's *Gangewifre* (choreographed and performed by Ilona Jäntti) provides a particularly clear example of circus work in which the distribution of agency among the elements of the technical assemblage appears especially important.

Gangewifre opens with light: a small spotlight slowly fades in. As we begin to pick out the contours of a strange, angular installation, a woman—Jäntti—appears in the light,

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[7] "One needs first to distinguish between two sorts of affections: *actions*, which are explained by the nature of the affected individual, and which spring from the individual's essence; and *passions*, which are explained by something else, and which originate outside the individual. Hence the capacity for being affected is manifested as a *power of acting* insofar as it is assumed to be filled with active affections, but as a *power of being acted upon* insofar as it is filled by passions" (Deleuze 1970, 27).

[8] Spinoza adds a third fallacy to the list—the *theological illusion*, whereby consciousness invents an anthropomorphic God in order to deal with situations in which environmental phenomena clearly overdetermine solipsistic agency—in order to round out his description of the triple illusion by which "consciousness calm[s] its anguish" (Deleuze 1970, 20).

responding to its call. She walks straight to the object, which, as the lights reach full brightness, turns out to be a taut network of thin, black ropes, splayed out like an exploded asterisk. They extend past the illuminated territory, attached somewhere out in the darkness. She leans on one diagonal strand as if testing its give; it sinks under her weight but eventually supports her. Reaching above her head and grabbing another rope for balance, she makes her way up the structure, her body quietly twisting at odd angles, its parts spatially organized according to the requirements of the object.

Throughout the piece, the object—which turns out to extend entirely across the space, from floor to ceiling and horizontally out beyond the spectator's purview—remains only partially lit, thematically un-knowable and inaccessible. At one point, the light is designed in such a way that we barely see the black ropes at all, the shape of Jäntti's body our only clue to their arrangement. She appears to float in space, responding in movement to … what? In this section, we get the passion of the body (its capacity for being affected by the objects it encounters) abstracted out from the encounter itself and presented as if it were 'free action'. But the spectator already knows that the object is present, and indeed that the object is in some way calling the shots, so we fill it back in with our imagination, rehearsing the critical move which Spinoza advocates to counter what he calls the *illusion of free decrees.*

At other times, Jäntti is rather more assertive with her movement, flinging herself around a dark filament as if in desperation. There is a certain amount of circus training that clearly comes into play—Jäntti articulates her body in a way that an untrained performer never would. So although in isolated moments we might say the shape of the body is entirely determined by the object (for example, when she fully surrenders to gravity, suspended at key points by the object), she remains the apparent source of the force which is translated by the object into a range of possible forms. While the intensity of her movement depends largely on the object (in zones where the ropes are closely interwoven, her movement has a different quality than in zones where one lone rope stretches across the space), her own choreographic authority also has a certain effect on the intensity of the piece and its changes in intensity over time. It is in this sense that we can understand the distribution of agency as a dramaturgical parameter: at some points, agency appears fully in the hands of the artist; at some points, it seems to be exerted by a dominant technical discourse; and at some points, it is clearly attributable to the desiring force of material non-life.

What is striking about *Gangewifre* in the context of contemporary circus as a field is its disinterest in the performance of psychologized subjectivity through engagement with the mimetic. Rather, Jäntti grants value to both the body and the object inasmuch as they are both material actors defining the territory and intensity of a certain process. Such an attribution of value puts Jäntti's work in line with the ethical project of the American contemporary philosopher, Jane Bennet. In her 2010 book *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett advocates a reconfiguration of the way we talk about action, desire, and will, both in theory and in everyday discourse. Rather than attaching special importance to human subjectivity, consigning non-human and non-living modes to a kind of underclass, Bennett seeks to "*raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed*" (2010, 12). Bennett's concerns come from a practical corner: she points out that "the Kantian imperative to treat humanity always as an end-in-itself and never merely as a means does not have a stellar record of success in preventing human suffering or promoting human well-being [… perhaps because it relies] on the image of an intrinsically *hierarchical* order of things" (2010, 12).

Performance which challenges the ontological primacy of the human by presenting her as determined and acted-upon by the non-life she encounters does not deny the *difference* between the human and the object, but it does de-stabilize her centrality:

especially in the case of circus work structured outside the logic of mimesis, the spectator can rehearse a mode of seeing which grasps the human essentially as "a *particularly rich and complex* collection of materials" (2010, 10). Bennett emphasizes that this more egalitarian distribution of value—accorded not only to people, but to "bodies as such" (2010, 13)—is important because the category of 'personhood' is constructed according to hegemonic power gradients. A model of valuation which relies on proximity to the Ideal Human hinges on the contingent definition of that humanity—a definition determined by power, predicated on the exclusion of the disenfranchised. Bennet thinks that material entities have not only socially-constructed value but also *essential* value—an inherent potential and way of acting in the world, something close to Spinoza's essential constitutive relations—and that a system of values based on shared materiality might alleviate some of the suffering wrought upon bodies who refuse or are unable to "conform to a particular (Euro-American, bourgeois, theocentric, or other) model of personhood" (2010, 13).

In the context of *Gangewifre*, Bennett's reflections appear at first rather abstract. What does Jäntti's simply-presented aerial performance have to do with politics or ethics? She certainly makes no direct reference to imperialism, sexism, or homophobia; that is to say, to the vectors of exploitation put in place by an anthropocentric system of values. She does, however, provide an event—and later, the remembered image of an event—which allows us to envision in a concrete way the workings of *thing-power*, preparing the ground for Bennett's ethical imperative. By confusing our notions of agency, *Gangewifre*—and other circus performance which thematizes specific objects—works towards the establishment of a new narrative of action, desire, and will, inspiring "a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin, in the sense of being inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations" (Bennett 2010, 13).

Bauke Lievens has noted that over the last twenty years, the relation between the circus body and its object, environment, or material milieu has gone "from physical dominance over the trajectories of the object [...] to the object dominating trajectories of the body" (2015, 18). While she continues to contend that "technical skill [...] expresses that old, traditional vision of Man, and of the world in general [...] in a way that is anachronistic and implausible in the context of our post-modern, meta-modern or even post-human experiences of the world surrounding us" (2015, 6), what Lievens' criticism fails to take into account is the possibility of a technicity founded on non-normativity rather than exceptionalism. The unusual ontology of circus technique that I propose in this thesis casts Lievens' observations about the shifting role of the circus object in a new light. Rather than staging bodies strong or capable enough to withstand the onslaught of the dominating object, thematically unusual circus technique highlights the circus body as *differently sensitive* to the call of the object.

In *Gangewifre*, this element of sensitivity is tangible. Parts of the piece have an impromptu feeling, as if Jäntti is reacting to the installation spontaneously and without plan. Moreover, Jäntti's (re)action is thematically *technical*; that is to say, unusual enough to appear mediated by a technique, which here appears as an embodied *process* rather than a pre-determined form. Regardless of the extent to which *Gangewifre* is actually improvised, the spectator has the impression that she is watching a body in a state of heightened reactivity, a body whose capacity to decipher the call of the object exceeds the norm to such an extent that the process of decryption itself is highlighted as learned (prosthetic). In a certain way, this excess re-introduces heroic exceptionalism. But if Jäntti plays the hero in *Gangewifre*, she plays a hero of sensitivity, not one of strength; these are feats not of

modernist *imposition* but of alliance, hybridization, and *composition*—a heroism fit for our time.

2,3 | *A brief word on virtuality*

In circus, bodies and objects come together on the basis of common notions intrinsic to their material arrangements, but which nevertheless decline to appear to the spectator until revealed by the emergence of the technical fact. Deleuze and Guattari call the set of undisconcealed properties and capacities inherent in the modes their *virtuality*. Simply put, the body has a virtual component in the sense that "*we do not even know what a body can do*" (Deleuze 1970, 17-18). Dance has already been busy for quite some time exploring the potential of the body and revealing the partiality with which it discloses itself to the spectator[9]; in circus, we might say that this revelation and thematization of the excess or hidden potential of the modes is applied more broadly—to non-living objects, and to the objects of our perception in general. It is in this sense that I would like to consider, as a third dramaturgical parameter, *the resonance of each object in the technical assemblage on a continuum extending between actuality and virtuality* (fig. 13).
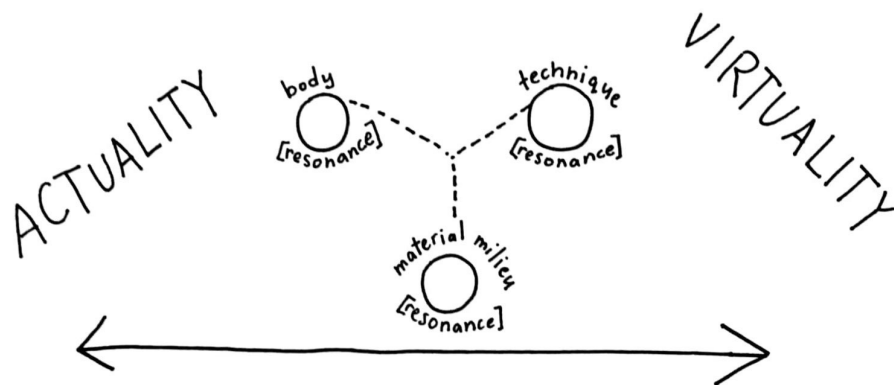

fig. 13

When a juggler, for example, throws a pattern hitherto-unseen, he not only actualizes a certain corporeal potential, but also a certain potential contained in the juggled object. Following materialist thinker Steven Shaviro, I propose that this moment of disconcealed potentiality moves in two affective directions at once. What we have already explored in our discussion of the immanence of the technical fact is the affect Shaviro calls *allure*: the "dazzlement of things bursting forth," the feeling that we encounter the elements of the assemblage more as they 'really are', more *essentially*, outside of representation and "beyond all definition or correlation" (2014, 8). The negative image of this unveiling is *metamorphosis*, the word Shaviro uses to refer to the epistemological destabilization affects of allure leave in their wake (fig. 14). As Shaviro explains, "In metamorphosis, it is not the thing itself that attracts me, over and above its qualities; it is rather the very unsteadiness of the thing that draws me onward, as it ripples and shifts [...] relating and referring beyond my capacity to follow" (2014, 8). If the circus body can do so much more than I (the spectator) had thought, how can I claim any real knowledge of the other bodies that surround me? If the juggling balls propose so much more than I was able to sense, to what other object-affects do I remain deaf?

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[9] See André Lepecki's analysis of Xavier LeRoy's *Self Unfinished* in *Exhausting Dance* (2006, 40-44).

As technical facts emerge and dissolve in circus, potentiality is converted into actuality. It does so by passing through what Deleuze and Guattari call 'threshold states,' moments of indeterminacy during which the stasis of actuality is put into movement.[10] According to Brian Massumi's reading of Deleuze and Guattari,

> *The virtual and the actual are coresonating systems. As the actual contracts a set of virtual states into itself at a threshold state, the virtual dilates. When the actual passes a threshold, bifurcates towards a specific choice, and renounces other potential states, the virtual contracts them back and the actual dilates* (1992, 65; fig 15).

As the technical assemblage repeatedly draws upon the virtual components of its parts, the virtual itself begins to make a spectral appearance in the the guise of an affect of metamorphosis. The more that circus bodies and objects move beyond the set of properties and capacities the spectator preemptively ascribes them, the stronger the apparent resonance of their virtual components. Circus work which deals with relating to and especially manipulating unpredictable objects—sand in Michiel DePrez's *Piste*; ice and plastic bags in the work of Phia Ménard[11]—thematizes not only the actuality of the object's activity, but also its escape from determination by human hands, eyes, and minds.
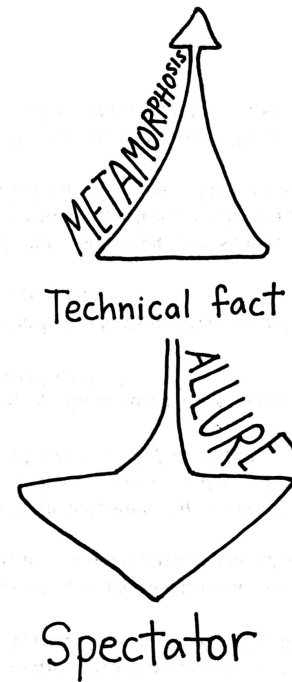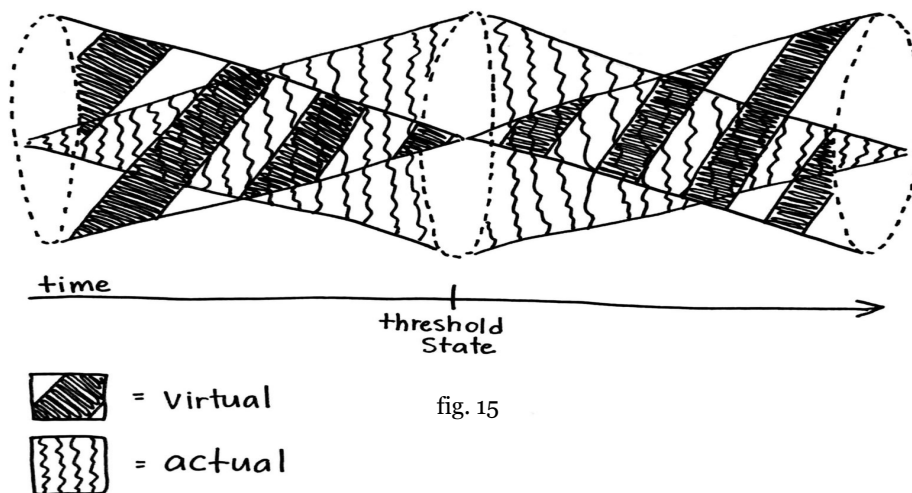

fig. 14

fig. 15

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[10] Any movement of meaning-making brings a state of affairs into a threshold state, in the sense that the transfer of force between a *collective assemblage of enunciation* (what appears to be an agent) and a *machinic assemblage* (what appears as the object of the agent's movement of expression) is dogged by the fractal opening of indeterminacy. As such "there can be no direct causal relation between content and expression [....] Meaning is a process of translation from one substance to another of a different order and back again, what it moves across is an unbridgeable abyss of fracturing " (Massumi 1992, 15-16). This is why the actual dilates and the virtual contracts at the moment of the encounter, at the threshold state: it is at this moment that potentiality is at its most resonant and actuality is at its least restrictive.

[11] See John Ellingsworth's review of *Vortex* in Sideshow magazine (2012).

3: Becoming technical, technical becoming

3,1 | *It's not unusual (to be inscribed in a mimetic economy)*

　　If circus is the performance of common notions—and specifically, common notions which appear as *technical* due to their divergence from the naturalized relations unreflectively sustained between humans and the material milieu—it would seem clear that the circus artist's process of research must involve the development of a finely-tuned sensitivity towards the virtual potential of her environment, in order to escape the regime of 'proper use' dictated by the social field. In reality, however, much circus research proceeds through the reproduction and then adjustment of technical facts pioneered by others, to the effect that circus often does not appear unusual at all to circus artists. Moreover—as anyone who has passed through a circus university will attest—their certainly exist regimes of 'proper use' specific to the field of circus as it exists today. These regimes impose a kind of alternative normativity on the technical fact and re-inscribe it within the economy of mimesis, insofar as adherence to such a regime is predicated on a certain degree of sameness. In this short final section, I pose the question, 'what is the normative?', in order to investigate what it is which makes a relation appear unusual. Here I turn to Brian Massumi's excellent analysis of Deleuze and Guattari's corpus, presented in his 1992 *User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, and especially his discussion of *planes of transcendence* and the concept of *becoming-other* (sometimes more succinctly called *becoming*).

　　In Deleuze and Guattari—and in my own thinking—normativity has to do with *molarity*. The term *molar* describes things which are seized as strongly unitary by an external observer or force: the force of language, for instance. A dog is *molar* to the extent that she conforms to a certain class or idea of dog-hood, and *molecular* to the extent that certain of her parts instantiate properties in excess of this definition. A rock is strongly molar, in that its inside and outside are clearly defined (by geological forces) and its parts are strongly constrained by the whole. The solar system, on the other hand, is strongly molecular insofar as its parts regularly enter into relations of exteriority and its borders are weakly defined (fig. 16).[1]
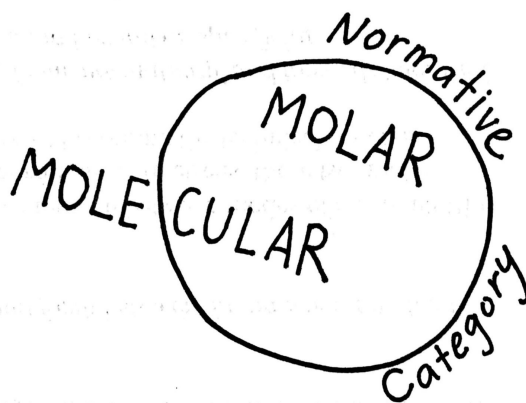

fig. 16

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[1] The molar/molecular distinction in many ways analogous to the stratum/*agencement* distinction explored in §1,2.

Norms are sets of "analogical correspondences [...delineating] a system of potential symbolic relays from one organic (molar) whole to another" (Massumi 1992, 97): norms are the building blocks of the mimetic. Norms are surpassed when a whole exceeds its own subjection to wholeness or totality, moving beyond imitation and towards specificity. In a normative regime, "resemblance dominates, boundaries blur, metaphors proliferate and identity confusion looms" (1992, 97)—while the non-normative is singular, specific, alluring and metamorphic.

So we might say that circus technique is non-normative action to the extent that it performs an exit from the 'system of analogical correspondences' which ground referentiality. An action or event appears non-normative inasmuch as the spectator has the impression that its wholeness somehow surpasses or escapes her perceptive grasp—it resists the molarizing force of her naming, opening an 'opaque zone' as discussed in §1,3. Nevertheless, in practical terms, technical facts *do* get named, labelled, copied, distributed, and inducted into reference—molarized—at least within the small circus community. This involves the creation of what Deleuze and Guattari call a *plane of transcendence*.

A plane of transcendence is a "movement of abstraction" (1992, 111), whereby a real event is reduced to its image (literally or in terms of mental images), coded and 'pixelated', in order that it might be reproduced across space and time.[2] When this happens, the "dynamic potential [of an event] is simultaneously carried to a higher power and *dulled, diffracted, captured in a regularizing network of forces*" (1992, 19; emphasis mine; fig. 17). A regularized (*transcendent*) technical fact appears not as a unique alluring / metamorphic event but rather as the mimetic imitation of certain unitary action.
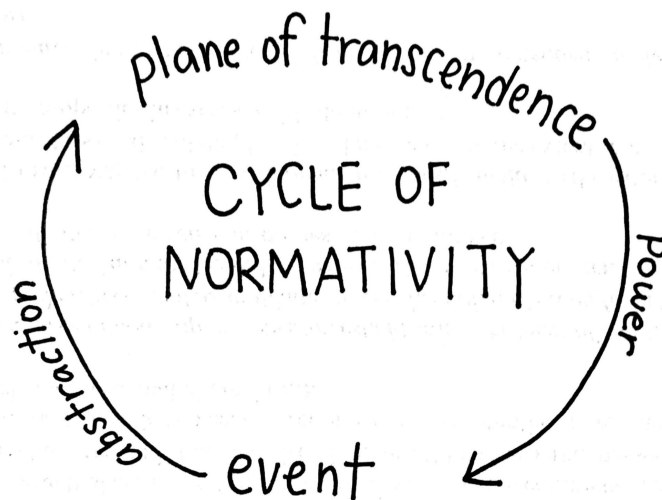

fig. 17

Usually, the technical fact is a kind of mix of immanence and transcendence: for example, a new trick in hand-to-hand acrobatics might arise from improvisation, from embodied experimentation, or from a lucky mistake (immanence), but simultaneously follow a kind of technical progression determined by the history of hand-to-hand and the received desire for clear body lines and sharp, crisp balance (transcendence). At this stage in the history of circus spectatorship, the public remains largely uninformed about circus

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[2] Deleuze calls the energy which produces unique events *force*, and the energy which *re*-produces unique events, *power* (Massumi 1992, 19).

technique, and is thus unable to really tell if the technical fact is an original or a copy. To most people, *all* of circus looks 'new'. Nevertheless, certain familiar qualities will appear to gesture towards the circus body's subjection to transcendence, even for the least circus-literate: movement that refers to gymnastics, ballet and other codified dance forms, circus and vaudeville tradition as represented in reproducible images, etc....

The question becomes: does the technical fact appear to exhibit bottom-up (immanent) or top-down (transcendent, mimetic) causality, and to whom (fig. 18)? And if / when contemporary circus begins to gather the kind of knowledgeable audience which already attends contemporary theatre and dance, how do we begin to take the transcendent aspect of circus technique into account? Such a line of questioning implies the introduction of a fourth and final (in this thesis) dramaturgical parameter, tracking the *apparent cause of technical fact as it fluctuates between immanence and transcendence* (fig. 19). Despite the problematic reduction which such a parameter implies (whereby a varied and variable audience is reduced to an average spectator with an average knowledge of the form), the fact remains that the spectator reads the technical fact differently depending of whether it appears to be the copy of an (abstract, transcendent) something, or whether it appears to emerge from a process of immanence.
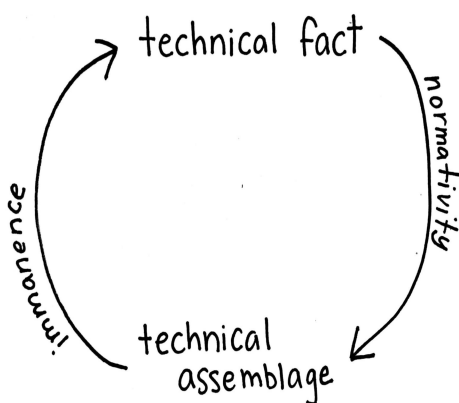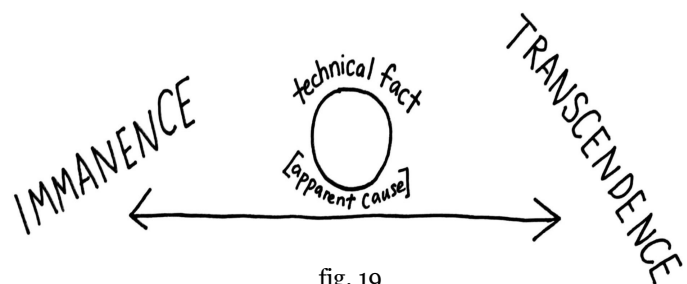

fig. 18

fig. 19

In the context of contemporary circus dramaturgy, this parameter is of prime importance because the appearance of transcendent causality re-introduces the mimetic. A thematically transcendent technical fact—a technical fact whose adherence to a certain normative register is unmistakable—remains within the territory of the known. In such an instance, the double movement of allure/metamorphosis does not occur; instead, the trick is primarily read as reference (reference to danger, to a certain kind of subjectivity, to spectacle, to sport, to a technical lineage, *anything except itself in its fullness*). Such a move represents an *emptying* of technical facts, which are thereby "grasped solely from the point of view of their generality [...,] subsumed by a general idea, or norm" (Massumi 1992, 96).

There is nothing to say that this very emptying might not serve as a kind of content: Henrik and Louise's *Extreme Symbiosis*, for example, takes the reproduced and reproducible ontology of the circus trick as the basic building block of a very effective dramaturgy.[3] In the

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[3] *Extreme Symbiosis* is an intermedial circus performance featuring a hand-to-hand acrobatics duo. They perform their daily training session against the backdrop of video footage documenting their years of technical development.

context of the present investigation, however, work which thematizes training or the historical development of a certain acrobatic vocabulary appears to function according to a theatrical logic, relying on relatability and referentiality and backgrounding the affective impact of the technical facts themselves. In the interest of discovering a dramaturgical logic native to circus technique, and not one borrowed from theater, it appears important to ask the question: what transcendent abstracts impose top-down causality on the technical fact, constraining it at least partially within the realm of the known?

Despite the nominative rejection of spectacularity put forth in the introduction to this thesis, I argue that circus technique continues to be developed according to the transcendent logic of the spectacular, in the image of early circus artists who impressed their publics with feats of grace, dexterity and fortitude. Even if contemporary circus tends to stage technical facts in a way that downplays their spectacularity, technical research continues to largely privilege the higher, the faster, the stronger, and the quantitatively more. Such a subjection to transcendence assures "that a body is channeled into the constellations of affect and orbits of movement set out for it by its assigned category," the realization of radical immanence curtailed by unreflected adherence to what Massumi calls a "map of habit" (1992, 114). In order for contemporary circus to truly shed its patina of spectacle—in order that the work being made might start to live up to the promises of its discourse—we need to thoroughly examine the way the spectacular works as a transcendent constraint, and think about ways of stepping beyond that constraint.
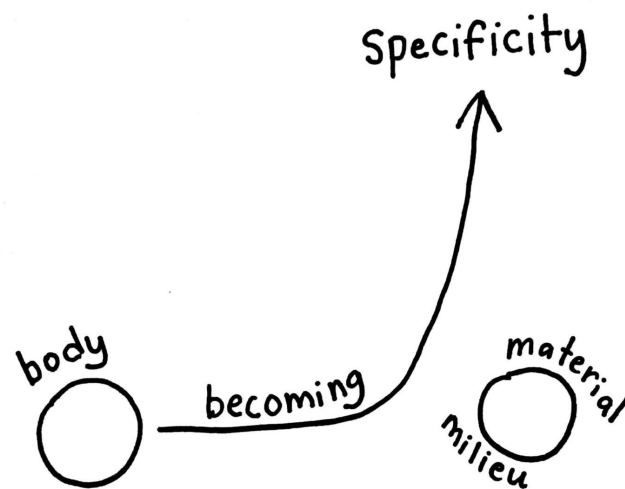

fig. 20

The process of stepping beyond transcendent constraints—beyond molarity—is called *becoming-other* (sometimes simply *becoming*) in the work of Deleuze and Guattari. A body becoming-other is a body in a process of experimentation, rather than a state of imitation (*becoming-the-same*; Massumi 1992, 96). Becoming-other is a path towards the unknown, the never-before-materialized, the non-normative: a path of immanence. As Massumi puts it, "Becoming, in its simplest expression, is a tension between modes of desire plotting a vector of transformation between two molar coordinates" (Massumi 1992, 94): becoming involves two molar wholes, coming together to come undone, flowing into one another and unpredictably transforming each other (fig. 20). In circus, these two molar wholes are the body and the object, and the vector of becoming the technical process. What such a process

investigates is "first and foremost realms of action—what a paw and a hand can do, where bodies can go, not on average, but in the extreme: their range of affect, or 'latitude'" (1992, 98). But bodies beholden to a transcendent set of values are limited in their latitude, failing to truly explore their hybridizing and transformative potential.

A truly immanent process is always improvised. From a dramaturgical perspective, a process will *appear* immanent insofar as the entities involved in the composition perform a negotiation moving them together towards the unknown. In a very simple way, staging which emphasizes the element of surprise accomplishes this. But a more interesting dramaturgical method might involve real improvisation, either set beforehand or performed live on stage. Circus bodies can only really step beyond the transcendent abstracts—beyond normativity— by relinquishing the image of the technical fact in favor of the sensitive and reactive technical process. Although circus artists have a tendency to think of technique in terms of results, the Deleuzian concept of becoming suggests the importance of a renewed focus on the technical process. What kinds of perceptive feedback-loops do circus artists employ to listen to their object, and how can such a feedback-loop be used to generate formal arrangements which are in some ways beyond form, beyond the function of naming, beyond molarity? Circus which engages in such an inquiry might truly be said to have moved into a paradigm worthy of the qualifier 'contemporary'.

4: Conclusion

4,1 | Contemporary circus in the context of resistance
      In this thesis, I set out to re-conceptualize the performance of circus technique, and to separate technicity itself out from the way it has traditionally been performed. Debased and ignored since the days of Aristotle, technicity in recent history has quietly been moving to the fore both as a matter of common concern and as a potential site of resistance. Understood as the membrane mediating our relationship to the material world, the technical emerges as important in many related 21st-century crises: ecological, economic, subjective. How do we relate to the things around us, what codes do we consciously or subconsciously follow when doing so, and how might we increase our sensitivity to the withdrawn potentiality of the material world?
      Above, I have proposed four dramaturgical parameters which help us think the performance of circus technique not in terms of its mimetic referentiality, but with an eye to formal composition:

1. *The aspectual change in the technical assemblage over time on a scale extending between agencement and stratum;*
2. *The affection of each mode in the assemblage on a continuum stretching between passion and action;*
3. *The resonance of each element of the technical assemblage on a continuum extending between actuality and virtuality;*
4. *The apparent cause of technical fact as it fluctuates between immanence and transcendence.*

I hope that the introduction of this vocabulary into the field will help makers and critics think about the circus technique from the point of view of its full specificity. I would also like to point out that although such a discourse takes form as its starting point, its agenda is far from purely formal. As I have tried to imply in my discussion of these concepts, a materialist formalism brings with it certain implicit practical and ethical concerns: about the body and its relative freedom or determination; about non-humans and the role we accord them as active agents; about the value of acknowledging material potentiality and its tendency to exceed imagined ranges of possibility; and about the force of *becoming* as a strategy to bypass the limited futures set forth by mimesis. A materialist approach to circus dramaturgy first looks inwards—at form—in order to take a stance on real-world performativity. What good can circus performance do?
      Today, well-developed networks for circus production and presentation exist in Western Europe, North America, and Australia. In order that these networks might begin to actively generate new knowledge through material practice, we need to effect a major discursive shift in the circus world. Rather than asking about 'content'—subject-matter understood in terms of mimetic reference—we need to begin to ask about process, affect, and energy. If the circus world continues to prioritize articulable meaning, circus will remain in the realm of the known, parroting received wisdom and pop-psychology. To truly position circus as meaningful in the world, it is essential that we posit the primacy of process over product, insisting on deploying the technical fact in view of its specificity rather than its generality and refusing to submit technical developments to the limits of the imagination.
      In his article 'Transformance: The Body of Event', originally published in 2006, philosopher and cultural theorist Boyan Manchev draws an etymological distinction between

performance—a bringing-to-completion, a fulfillment of form—and *transformance,* which implies "not fulfilling, executing the form, but constantly destabilizing it, stepping beyond its borders, changing the very condition of its actualization, suspending its limits in the unlimited potentiality" (2012, 125; fig. 21). The circus that I have written about in this thesis is precisely a circus of transformance, a circus in which the body "detaches itself from the order of representation and functionality in order to reveal itself as a space of possibility" (2012, 127). Manchev is thinking of contemporary dance when he writes of "an opening of the properties of the body, or rather [...] an experimentation of the techniques of the body, that is to say, the *de-monstration* of the body as the *tekhné* par excellence, the *techno-logical* becoming of the body" (2012, 126). But non-mimetically-organized circus performance goes above and beyond the embodied resistance envisioned by Manchev, not only moving the body beyond form, but also dealing with the un-representable potentiality of non-humans and non-life.

fig. 21

Manchev talks about transformance in the context of what he calls 'perverted capitalism.' Inasmuch as our technical knowledge is geared towards functionality within the current economic system, Manchev thinks it is determined and constrained by that system. Moreover, acquiescence to such a regime—in this thesis, to the regime of the spectacular, or the regime of appropriate object-use—is to a greater or lesser extent a move which further consolidates its hegemony. If dance appears as an "open space for body experimentation" (2012, 126), away from the limits of normativity as defined by economy, then circus—with its inherent commitment to non-normativity—seems even more well-suited as a vehicle of resistance and a harbinger of the new. For in watching circus performance we see before us not only the latitude of the human body, but also the object's capacity to escape its generalization at the hands of universal commoditization. Most importantly, the spectator comes to intuitively understand the way one (human) escape relates to the other (objective) one; the way heterogenous modes can come together to resist the imposition of transcendent values and systemic constraints. Circus not only demonstrates instances of transformance, it also provides techniques with which to do so.

Although the post-human, the post-modern, the affective and the anti-logocentric hold currency in the academic establishment, the analyses and re-evaluations humanities departments are performing are yet to be widely accepted outside the walls of the university. Circus especially seems resistant to what is perceived as an overly-theoretical viewpoint. Along with the philosophical challenges which I've begun to tackle here, the practical challenge of initiating fluent critical discourse within the circus community and between artists and academics remains extremely pertinent. As more and more curious circus artists turn to theory and philosophy to nourish their processes, and as the practice of circus dramaturgy begins to gain traction, it seems entirely possible that contemporary circus will soon move into a new phase of its development. The framework outlined in this thesis models only one possible direction such a development might take. It seems clear,

nevertheless, that the intersection of circus and materialist philosophy yields a rich set of formal and ethical insights, insights whose practical applications are as-of-yet unexplored in their fullness. As circus moves into the future, I am committed to continuing my investigation, following both circus and philosophy as the two fields deepen their connection. It is an exciting time in circus, and I am looking forward to participating in the fullness of its unfolding.

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