

*360° CIRCUS: MEANING. PRACTICE. CULTURE,*  
LONDON: ROUTLEDGE, 2023. 202 P. FRANZISKA  
TRAPP.

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**M**ULTI-FACETED studies explore a subject in all its complexity and from as many points of view as possible. The goal of such an analysis is not to define, but to articulate. In *360° Circus: Meaning. Practice. Culture*, Franziska Trapp brings together fourteen chapters from different authors with backgrounds in art, education and research. This international anthology acknowledges and celebrates that circus cannot be defined in just one way and thus needs to be explored in 360 degrees. The book's goals are to explore the production and transmission of meaning in and through circus, to examine how research and creation can feed back into one another, to understand how artists position themselves within culture, and to explore how circus both impacts and is impacted by society. The volume is organized into three sections: Meaning, Practice and Culture.

The Meaning section includes Jean-Michel Guy's "Circus does not exist" and Veronika Štefanová's "'La Putyka' by Cirk La Putyka: a glimpse at Czech contemporary circus." The Practice section begins with "On mutations of forms, style, and meaning: from a traditional to a contemporary trapeze act," an interview with Sandy Sun conducted by Franziska Trapp and Riikka Juutinen. The other chapters in this section are "Articulating hand-balancing: finding space for critical self-transformation" by Camilla Damkjaer, "Extreme symbiosis" by Louise von Euler Bjurholm and Henrik Agger, "Hamlet: To have written or not to have written for the tightwire" by Louis Patrick Leroux, "Verticality, gravity, sense of balance. Transmitting a technique, conveying a sensation: practices and discourses of circus arts teachers" by Agathe Dumont, and Franziska Trapp's

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“Reading circus: dramaturgy on the border of art and academia.” This section also includes visual documentation by Andreas Gärtner of the international UpSideDown Circus and Space conference held at the University of Münster in 2017. Finally, the Culture section closes the book with contributions from several authors, including “Circus between technique and technology: heideggerian ‘enframing’ and the contested space of free expression,” by Sebastian Kann, “Chaplin, Brecht, Fo: toward a concept of epic clowning” by Gaia Vimercati, “To walk the tightwire” by Ante Ursić, “The spatiality of Australian contemporary circus” by Kristy Seymour, and Peta Tait’s “Cheerful, nostalgic, melancholic: mood in circus.”

By presenting these diverse perspectives, *360° Circus* seeks to answer the question, “When is there Circus?” Trapp’s introduction addresses this question by identifying common elements that act as guidelines throughout the book—interstitial spaces, the relationship between circus and other art forms, meta-discourse and embodied practice.

Understanding contemporary circus as “a twilight zone between bodily practice and cultural discourse,” as Trapp describes it, means to engage in an embodied practice where awareness of the self can become what Damkjaer conceives as a critical transformation space (101; 47–54). This self-aware and critical space of embodiment can reveal how Von Euler Bjurholm and Agger’s work on symbiosis suggests that we relate to others (55–70). At the same time, according to Tait, circus techniques and processes are enculturated and carry meaning constructions throughout history (179–194); thus, they possess poetics of their own, and their nature is highly dialectical. According to Dumont, this could explain why, paradoxically, embodied knowledge and bodily awareness (e.g., circus technique and movement) are often taught through a series of imaginaries and metaphors (87–99). Due to this tension, it is possible to read circus like any other performative creation situated within a cultural framework. In fact, circus creation processes may benefit from cultural poetic readings; Trapp provides a dramaturgical method for this that she developed with a group of students and the Tall Tales Company (100–114). This approach advantageously opens, reopens and allows for the reformulation of circus disciplines. The ability to innovate is present like a latent desire throughout the last half of the book.

According to Kann, longing for creative freedom and self-expression implies that certain paradigms constraining circus contexts need rethinking (125–134). Seymour’s analysis of the National Institute of Circus Arts (NICA) in Australia is a valuable case study of this issue (161–178). As Kann suggests in his skillful reflection on Heidegger and Arendt, the need to understand technique under new lights exposes the anxiety and alienation associated with tricks and codifications that practitioners feel silently forced to adhere to. He recommends

challenging normativity and expectations in circus as a starting point to create a space where self-expression becomes an actual possibility. The final chapter by Vimercati emphasizes the idea of finding strategies of resistance (136–152). “Success” is defined as the possibility to create on one’s own terms rather than the achievement of technical execution; this kind of success is also contemplated in terms of its political implications.

This book has significant value for scholars, students and circus practitioners alike. Trapp’s circus panopticon comprehends bodily practice and theoretical study as a symbiosis in different declinations of art-based research. This approach reflects the value of situated perspectives shaped by experience in live arts, where the body, the person, the work and the context overlap to inform meaning, practice and culture. Each chapter articulates diverse interests and ultimately prompts contemplation about what circus can be.

*360° Circus* provides a wide range of compelling circus research projects conducted in Canada, Sweden, Australia, Germany, Italy, France, the United States and the Czech Republic. However, it does not include research from circus communities in Asia, Latin America or Africa. I believe that a broader inclusion of intellectual capital from diverse geographies other than Western countries in the northern hemisphere could enhance the 360-degree view and make the book more inspiring. It would also be refreshing to consider circus beyond its conventional procedures by inviting forms of circus that cannot be staged (or that exist in atypical formats) into the panopticon. For example, the chapters on tightwire by Leroux and Ursić reminded me of Taus Makhacheva’s audiovisual work *Tightrope* (2015), which I think would be an ideal fit. Furthermore, as the book seems to favour a diverse conception of circus, expanding it into a series may create space for a larger panoramic exploration of circus.

Overall, Trapp’s editorial framework brings coherence to the texts featured. Looking ahead, the potential for the continued exploration of new approaches to circus is vast. We must continue to seek out and recognize emerging and different perspectives as valid contributions to our collective knowledge about what circus can be.

## Reference

*Tightrope*. Directed by Taus Makhacheva, performance by Rasul Abakarov. 2015.

## Author Biography

Paloma Leyton is a doctoral student in Arts Studies and Practices at UQAM, a doctoral student in Visual, Performing and Media Arts at UniBo and a student

member of the Hexagram network. Her activities intertwine research, creation and pedagogy in visual arts and aerial circus disciplines. Her research focuses on the movement of the body in suspension on unstable aerial apparatus, as well as exploration of the relationship between gravity management and the construction of imaginaries in aerial kinetics.