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Searching for an Escape: An Autoethnographic Study of Aesthetic Innovation in Professional Circus School

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In Western professional circus education, innovation is often cast as a positive, disruptive force. Openness to innovation is lauded by many for enabling young artists to express their unique, authentic selves. This optimistic story, however, fails to consider innovation's ideological function in post-Fordist capitalism and, in so doing, obscures the ambivalent ways students experience the call to innovate.

In this study, I use reflexive journaling to unsettle this narrative by exploring the polyvalent ways in which innovation features in my life as a student at École nationale de cirque. I explore the competing ways different members of the community, including students, coaches/administrators and casting agents/companies, understand innovation to reveal the pressures students must navigate to find artistic satisfaction and professional viability. The data are interpreted in light of my positionality and contextualized using performance studies research.

Overall, innovation is not the straightforward, liberating force it is often made out to be. While many students at École nationale de cirque aspire to innovate, they can also feel pressure to do so to win social capital and professional advantages. The type of innovation they are able to explore, however, is bounded by material constraints, ideological structures and market incentives which reward novelty and uniqueness but discourage questioning norms. Coupled with the post-Fordist shift from mass production to hyper-individual competition, this transforms innovation into a tool for self-promotion. In Western contemporary circus education, students can struggle to navigate these conflicting pressures, thus experiencing the call to innovate as a source of anxiety as much as freedom.

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Résumé: Dans la formation professionnelle des arts du cirque en Occident, l'innovation est souvent perçue comme une force positive et disruptive. Beaucoup prônent l'ouverture à l'innovation pour permettre aux jeunes artistes d'exprimer leur personnalité unique et authentique. Mais ce discours optimiste oublie de prendre en compte la fonction idéologique de l'innovation dans le capitalisme post-fordiste. Ce faisant, il cache l'ambivalence avec laquelle les étudiant.e.s reçoivent l'appel à l'innovation.

Dans cette étude, j'utilise des méthodes autoéthnographiques pour bousculer ce discours en explorant les multiples façons que prend l'innovation dans ma vie d'étudiante à l'École nationale de cirque. J'examine la diversité de manières dont les différents membres de la communauté (étudiant·e·s, coachs/administrateur·rice·s, agents de casting/compagnies de cirque) comprennent l'innovation afin de mettre en lumière les pressions auxquelles les étudiant·e·s doivent se faire face pour trouver l'épanouissement artistique et professionnel. L'interprétation des données tient compte de ma position et leur contextualisation s'appuie sur des recherches en études de la performance.

D'une manière générale, l'innovation ne constitue pas la force libératrice que l'on voudrait souvent nous renvoyer. Alors que la volonté d'innover se retrouve chez beaucoup d'étudiant·e·s de l'École nationale de cirque, elle s'accompagne d'une réelle pression liée au capital social et aux avantages professionnels à acquérir. Toutefois, le type d'innovation qu'ils puissent explorer est limitée par des contraintes matérielles, des structures idéologiques et de l'influence du marché, qui tend à récompenser la nouveauté et l'originalité, mais qui dissuade tout questionnement des normes. Si l'on combine ce phénomène à l'évolution post-fordiste où l'on passe d'une production en série à une concurrence hyperindividuelle, l'innovation devient alors un outil d'autopromotion. Dans la formation circassienne contemporaine en Occident, les étudiant·e·s peuvent avoir du mal à gérer ces pressions contradictoires et ainsi vivre cette incitation à innover autant comme une source d'anxiété que de liberté.

Keywords: post-Fordism, innovation, performance studies, aesthetics, contemporary circus, arts education, individualism, post-fordisme, études de la performance, esthétique, cirque contemporain, éducation artistique, individualisme

Introduction

> *"[R]eduction of art making to the pursuit of the new drains communities of their worldliness"* (Azoulay 61).

When I arrived at École nationale de cirque (ENC), it was with a zealous determination to innovate.

I had just graduated from a small liberal arts university in the US and was returning to circus galvanized to make change by a newfound understanding of the politics of performance. The circus I'd grown up in felt incommensurate with my evolving values. In particular, I was concerned about the way traditional and mainstream circus's approach to virtuosity reflects aspects of Modern Western ideology that have functioned in past and present to reinforce systems of oppression (Paycha and Lievens 22). For political and personal reasons alike, I was done overtraining my body to reproduce extreme movements, treating European aesthetics as an invisible universal and calling it a celebration of freedom. To have a healthy, happy career, I knew I would need to innovate.

At first, I thought that my desire to innovate set me apart from my peers. As I got deeper into professional circus school, however, I realized that I was not alone in my obsession with innovation. Many people at ENC, including students, coaches and administrators, value and desire innovation. The existence of this study is proof that innovation is prized within the community: it's not a topic I chose for myself, but one I was asked to study by one of the institution's top administrators. The administrator remarked:

> ENC has a reputation for caring about technical excellence at the expense of creative experimentation. But ENC students are innovating every day—this work just isn't visible to the outside world. I want you to make that creativity visible, because innovation can help attract funding.

In other words, this administrator wanted me to highlight the innovation present in the school in order to dispel ENC's reputation for being too high pressure to permit experimentation. While my peers are creating a lot of great art, and I agree that the school's reputation is out of date, I was interested in exploring deeper questions. The transparency of this pitch prompted me to question my own obsession with innovation. I'd thought innovation was a way of disrupting systems of power but here was one of the most powerful people within the school telling me that innovation was an economic asset.

This project documents the year of struggle and discovery that followed as I, with the support of the school, tried to make sense of the role of innovation in my life, at ENC and in the culture of circus at large.[1]

In this study, I use autoethnography to explore the polyvalent way in which innovation featured in my life as a student at ENC. I tease apart the competing ways different members of the community, including students, coaches/administrators and casting agents/companies, use the term innovation and trace how my relationship with innovation shifted as I untangled these conflicting visions of change. I put my own experience in dialogue with performance and circus

studies research to explore how twenty-first century market ideology shapes the role of innovation in Western contemporary circus education.

At ENC, the drive to surpass technical and creative limits animates individuals throughout the community. While people in different social positions define innovation in divergent ways, the value of innovation itself is rarely contested. In fact, the term "innovation" is used so frequently that it has become a nebulous buzzword. In practice, its meaning bleeds beyond the confines of its definition. This very ambiguity makes innovation a fertile lens for studying ideology, for calling something innovative is a power move. To deem something innovative is to position it as the future and, not just that, but to locate it as a forward step on the imagined linear march of progress. This shapes the distribution of power and value in the present.

The goal of this paper is to look through the opaqueness of innovation to see what the conflict over its definition reveals about the pressures circus students must navigate to find artistic satisfaction and professional viability. My intent is not to define what innovation is or should be. Rather, I am interested in examining how students understand innovation for themselves, *in situ*, and in treating the very muddiness of this experiential knowledge as a door for analysis. My aim is not to look *at* innovation, but to look *through* it. Looking *through* innovation cancels out its aspirational glow, leaving the surplus meaning that gets smuggled in with every claim of innovation bare for analysis.

The slice of innovation I study is *the ideology of aesthetic innovation in professional circus education*. By this I mean that the object of my analysis is innovation as a cultural and ideological discourse, not a material practice. I am not concerned with whether the work that students are producing is veritably innovative but rather with how innovation as an aspirational ideal shapes their behavior and impacts their wellbeing. Similarly, because my focus is on aesthetics, I do not address questions of innovation in domains beyond dramaturgy such as pedagogy, equipment/design, safety/health care, etc. Overall, what I'm interested in is how students relate to the pursuit of novelty, uniqueness and excellence that typifies most of circus and "innovation" is a term that is often used to capture this constellation of ideas.[2]

Innovation on its own is neither good nor bad. In professional circus education, however, it is buried under so many layers of ideology that students (and others in the circus community) lack the agency to engage with it on their own terms. My hope is that by sharing the complex way I have related to innovation during my time in professional circus school—and by naming the historical forces and socioeconomic pressures that have shaped this experience—I can dissipate these ideological clouds and thus help empower others to approach innovation in the way that best serves their wellbeing. Studying innovation from such an enmeshed, first-person perspective provides insights into how different

people define circus in the present, envision its evolution, police its boundaries and struggle or succeed within the industry. Above all, it reveals the distance between the stories we use to make sense of the world and daily reality—and who absorbs the strain of this disjunction.

Methodology

Autoethnography is an anthropological method in which the researcher turns the lens of analysis back on themselves to use their own experience as a window for analyzing sociocultural phenomena (Adams and Herrmann 2). Historically, anthropology involved White researchers studying "exotic" cultures in a gesture of othering that treated European society as a neutral viewpoint from which to make universal claims (Adams et al. 7). Autoethnographers reverse this epistemological system to

> contest the possibility of achieving the objectivity and neutrality touted in most social science research, reclaiming perspective (what some might call 'bias') to argue that it is impossible to stand or act outside of world-building and meaning-making processes (Adams et al. 6).

I chose to use autoethnography to study the ideological role of innovation in circus because a) knowledge is contextual and acknowledging how it is situated increases its utility (Haraway *passim*) and b) scholarship should grow out of, and help us make sense of, everyday experience (Hooks *passim*). Additionally, while previous research on innovation in circus has been done from historical, pedagogical and academic perspectives (Arrighi; Jürgens; Jürgens and Hildebrand), to my knowledge, the topic has yet to be considered from the point of view of a circus student.

Practically, this process involved five months of reflexive journaling focused on my aerial hoop classes, including any exceptional occurrences that had an impact on my approach to or feelings about innovation. I chose retrospective, reflexive journaling as my data collection method because I wanted to examine both my immediate feelings and actions and my ongoing attempts to frame these experiences through self-analysis (i.e. self-reflective data) (Chang 96–97). While I defaulted to thick description to capture as many of the embodied/emotional details of my experience as possible (Poulos 9), I chose not to impose a fixed structure on my journaling as the pattern of how and what I chose to write about is in itself revealing (Chang 121).

Data collection took place from 28 November 2022 to 28 April 2023. While my need to balance competing life demands made a standardized journaling

schedule impossible, I journaled roughly every other day such that an entry was made on sixty-five days out of the 151-day period (forty-three percent of days). Significant occurrences from the first three months of the year (September to November) and my first year at school (September 2021 to April 2022) were retrospectively documented using memory (Cooper and Lilyea 200), private journal entries and video artifacts.

Data analysis followed an emergent methodology that intentionally left space for insight and intuition (Chang 130). Analysis overlapped with data collection to enable theoretical sampling, meaning that as provisional themes took shape, new data sources were incorporated to provide a deeper understanding of these emergent topics (Clarke 557). I annotated the journal entries with open, topical tags and grouped these into recurring themes through iterative data sorting and constant comparison (Chun Tie et al.; Pace 9–13). I then layered these emergent themes over an autobiographical timeline to enable narrative analysis (Cooper and Lilyea 202). The data were interpreted by comparison with social science constructs drawn from performance and circus studies (in particular post-Fordism and anticolonial theory) (Chang 129, 136–137).[3]

The writing process served as a final, active method for data interpretation (Poulos 4; Richardson and St. Pierre). I structured my autoethnographic account as a progressive narrative (Chang 143) that layers confessional-emotive and analytical-interpretive content (Cooper and Lilyea 205; Pace 8) to accurately represent the way experience and analysis iteratively shaped one another within the project, as they do in daily life. Data excerpts were chosen for their evocativeness and pertinence to the autoethnographic timeline as well as for the presence of external data points to corroborate my internal account (Chang 103; Cooper and Lilyea 202). Excerpts were edited to achieve brevity without diminishing the essential, evocative power of honest voice and literary rendering (Charmaz and Mitchell 286–287; Pelias 121; Poulos 9). All quoted text was drawn from entries in my reflective journal and retold in my own words.

During the analysis, two terms emerged from the data as useful tools for parsing the autoethnographic account.[4] In daily life, people draw no clear semantic boundaries between innovation, creativity and contemporary aesthetics. To navigate this ambiguity, I use the term "disruptive innovation" to refer to innovation that troubles and expands the norms of the form. This is contrasted with "conservative innovation," which I use to refer to innovation that produces novelty while remaining within the boundaries of mainstream circus's aesthetic conventions.[5] These terms describe overlapping properties, not distinct objects. When I mention innovation without one of these qualifiers, it is because innovation is rarely only conservative or disruptive and the tensions hidden in this multiplicity have an impact on how students relate to aesthetic change.

The site I study is the École nationale de cirque, a semi-private circus school located on Tiohtià:ke (the unceded territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation known as Montreal) that holds innovation as one of its core values.[6] ENC is an elite post-secondary learning institution with an international student body comprising around twenty-five students per year and a rigorous curriculum that focuses on specialization and solo work.[7] As ENC is based in Canada, my analysis is grounded in Western circus history and culture and the conclusions drawn should not be generalized to contexts shaped by other historical, sociocultural or economic forces.[8]

Because this is an autoethnographic study, it is incumbent that I acknowledge my positionality: I am a queer, White American who comes from a privileged background, is slightly older than most ENC students and has a degree in science and technology studies. My specialty is aerial hoop, which has a profound impact on this research as different circus disciplines afford disparate day-to-day training practices and opportunities for innovation. I undertake this study as someone who passed through enthusiastically believing that innovation is always good before arriving at the ambivalent stance I now hold.[9]

While I am the only active participant in the study, the topic I am analyzing is inextricably social so whenever others appear in the text, I protect their anonymity by providing pseudonyms and excluding identifying details. A draft of the article was shared with and approved for publication by those whose personal stories feature prominently in the data (Tullis; Western University). These protocols were reviewed and accepted by ENC's Research Ethics Board (#CER 2223–01C).

Historical and Cultural Context

Innovation—as an ideal, practice and marketing strategy—is a foundational part of circus culture (Arrighi 176). The drive to overcome limits has long been central to the form. Circus's focus on virtuosity and individuality incentivizes artists to expand and exploit the edge of their unique capacities (Arrighi 396). This creates a progress-oriented culture in which innovation is always an implied goal. The ideology of innovation has shaped Western circus dramaturgy throughout its evolution, from the influence of the narrative of progress on the dramaturgy of traditional circus (Paycha and Lievens 22), to the significance of the May 1968 ethos of contestation to the emergence of nouveau cirque (Jürgens and Hildbrand 3), to the formative impact of neoliberal individualism on contemporary circus (Kann 4).

Today, innovation is such an endemic part of Western contemporary circus culture that it isn't really innovative. So much of circus can be reduced to a single gesture: the pursuit of exceptionalism. The idea that artists should always strive

to do things that others have never done or, better yet, *can* never do, is a foundational feature of the form. As Patrick Leroux writes:

> [C]ircus *expects and immediately absorbs newness*, it *fosters technical innovation* and *promotes socio-aesthetic representations of singularity* . . . [In circus,] avant-garde gestures . . . are immediately integrated into an ever-evolving vocabulary of embodied exceptionalism (239–240).

Perpetual innovation is necessary for the maintenance of Western contemporary circus as it exists today.

Growing up, I thought of innovation as a good thing. Most people do. And for good reason: innovation often increases people's quality of life. The drive to innovate is motivated by an honest desire to cultivate a better future. In broader twenty-first century culture, the positive associations of the word are so widespread that it appears in the mission and branding of organizations in virtually every field. In fact, a 2012 study found that less than half a percent of several thousand articles about innovation considered any possible negative aspects or impacts (Ampuja 27).

Contrary to this rhetoric, however, innovation is not an innocent concept. Innovation is a sustaining value of Western ideology (Ampuja) that has been used, in past and present, to reinforce the teleological narrative of progress that supports ongoing settler colonialism (Shahjahan 490–491). It also buttresses the utility-based value system and necessity of perpetual growth that undergird capitalism (Foster 28). While it claims to be an agent of change, innovation often renews the status quo rather than rupturing it.

Circus's obsession with innovation is part of this history. In fact, the emergence of the art form can be traced in part to the Modern thirst for novelty (Arrighi 176). Traditional circus rose to popularity in the nineteenth century against the backdrop of the industrial revolution, during a period of voracious European colonial conquest (Arrighi 171, 174). As it took form, circus came to reflect the anxieties around progress, difference and innovation that animated the Modern zeitgeist (Paycha and Lievens 22). As Arrighi writes in "The Circus and Modernity: A Commitment to 'the Newer' and 'the Newest'":

> [T]he capitalist market drives and narratives of innovation associated with modernity were embedded within the earliest productions of the circus and were, moreover, an intrinsic feature of the performance genre that came to be known as 'circus'" (176).

The capitalist thirst for innovation has been a core element of circus from the start.

The production of novelty in circus also has colonial roots. In the early days of traditional circus (particularly in Britain and the British colonies), circuses used the promise of innovation as an advertising hook to attract large crowds (Arrighi 177). The performance of innovation, whether in the form of ever more daring feats of mastery, exotic displays of difference and/or literal presentations of technological innovation, reflected—and in so doing, reinforced—two core pillars of colonial ideology: the idealization of progress and the hierarchical organization of difference (Arrighi 174; Jolly 93). It thus helped to cement the

> psychogeography of the [British] empire . . . [as] [t]he desire to come and see the latest innovations had a particular urgency for colonial spectators because they knew their part in the imperial project was to occupy its geographically leading edge (Jolly 93).

In Australian and North American circuses, this focus on the frontier also encouraged the performance of exoticism/uniqueness as visible in the sideshow and the proliferation of different circus acts: if something couldn't be (or claim to be) *temporally* the newest, it could be *geographically* the most different (Arrighi 178–179; Lavers et al. 56).

While contemporary circus contests many of the problematic features of traditional circus, it prizes innovation more than ever (Leroux 233). Ironically, contemporary circus's interest in innovation is often seen as setting it apart from traditional circus (Hildbrand et al. 247; Sizorn 502–503). Its focus on artistic innovation is posited as an antidote to the violence of traditional circus's athletic ambition (Lavers et al. 103–105). The very urge to distance itself from traditional circus through innovation, however, keeps contemporary circus tied to its Modern legacy. As Patrick Leroux writes,

> [Y]ears of ideological disagreement with traditional forms of circus have contributed to a generation of artists who cannot consider different ways of conceiving and practicing circus outside of these conventions of constant discontinuity. Postmodernism retains its connection to modernity by challenging it as much as it feeds it (236–237).

In attempting to distance itself from traditional circus, contemporary circus perpetuates the obsession with innovation that animated traditional circus in its colonial heyday.

Nonetheless, innovation features differently in contemporary circus. The emergence of contemporary circus was built on nouveau cirque's rejection of traditional circus values (Lavers at al. 159) and motivated in part by the desire for circus to be recognized as an art form (Sizorn 502). Contemporary circus thus

prides itself on shifting the focus of innovation away from traditional circus's bigger, stronger, faster ideals, towards dramaturgical experimentation and personalized aesthetics (Lievens). An increased focus on creative liberty is a core part of the genre's self-mythology.[10] This marks a change in the way freedom, and therefore innovation, figures in circus dramaturgies: where traditional circus glorified freedom of the physical body (freedom from the limits of nature achieved through discipline and dominance), contemporary circus concerns itself with freedom of the self (authentic self-expression, embrace of diverse identities) (Kann 4).

This focus on authentic self-expression is reflected in the culture and curriculum of many Western professional circus schools. Today's circus performers are expected to be authors as much as virtuosos (Sizorn 503), so training programs aim to help them develop their aesthetic sensibilities in addition to their athletic capacities. In many schools, students are not exclusively trained to conform to the ideal of a trained circus body, capable of seamlessly reproducing perfect lines, splits and acrobatic passes, but are also encouraged to develop unique skills and styles (Jacob 13).[11] They are invited to express themselves openly and to explore what is possible within the limits of the form. Many artists, educators and scholars laud this shift for replacing the normativity of circus's past with a celebration of authenticity and difference (Lavers at al. 103–105; Richard et al. 221).

Previous research, however, has not considered the role of innovation in Western contemporary circus from a student perspective. With this in mind, this paper aims to address the following questions: at École nationale de cirque, what incentives and constraints shape the innovation that students are interested in and able to pursue? To what extent does the invitation to innovate empower students to take ownership over their creativity? And most importantly: for professional circus students, does contemporary circus's focus on aesthetic innovation offer an escape from the influence of colonial, capitalist values on circus dramaturgies?

Experience

When I first arrived at ENC, I was determined to innovate. Fresh out of university and armed with a new arsenal of beliefs about performance, I was critical of the influence of systems of power on circus dramaturgy and felt I could no longer do circus in the unquestioning way I had as an adolescent.

In the timeless tradition of young artists, I was ambitious to participate in the evolution of the form. At first, I thought that my desire to innovate set me apart. It made me feel special to believe I was not just training for myself but

championing a virtuous disruption of circus aesthetics that would enlarge the field of possibility for others. I did not pause to question why it felt so important that I be the one to do this labor.

It didn't take me long after arriving at school, however, to learn that my desire to innovate did not put me in friction with the community. While ENC has a reputation for valuing technique over creativity, these days artistic innovation is more valued by students and staff than many acknowledge. There is both a desire for innovation amongst students and a commonly held belief that professional success requires differentiating oneself by developing an innovative style and skill set.[12] From my first days at school, I quickly absorbed the message that being a successful artist required not only mastering existing technique and styles but creating my own. Many of my coaches stressed the idea that while technical prowess is essential for hireability, in the precarity of the freelance market, being an innovator can give one a competitive edge. Cultural clues instilled in me the idea that innovation could help me stand out, both within the social and pedagogical context of the school and on the professional market.

In my first semester, I leaned into setting myself apart through innovation and it paid off. I made two acts: an intimate piece in silence with my eyes closed and a silly number about failure where I read about cows. Both were well enough received that they prompted a noticeable change in my social status. Students who had barely given me a passing glance before began to take interest in me, the merit of my artistic work suddenly putting me on the social map. It was nice to feel like I could have my cake and eat it too: that my desire to innovate could help me excel within the system even as it satisfied my need to feel disruptive.

What began as support, however, soon came to feel like pressure. In my first year, I was lonely and full of self-doubt. Because I knew from experience that aesthetic success could beget social rewards, I felt pressure to create innovative works to prove that I was a person worth taking interest in.

In the fall of my second year, I had a conversation with my friend Althea that confirmed that I was not the only one to feel pressure to innovate. I found Althea seated at a table by one of the library windows, looking for new music for the solo act they were preparing for our end of semester presentations. The subdued scene of Montreal in November leached cold, gray light onto their face, mixing with the blue glow of their laptop.

"I feel like the way I naturally move and create isn't contemporary enough to be taken seriously by other students," they said.

"I'm looking for new music 'cause I feel like I need to construct a unique audio-visual proposition or people will just dismiss my number. But it's going

really poorly. I can't find anything and I'm afraid I won't. I don't even want to present at this point. I wish I could just not present at all."

"But I love your style!" I responded in surprise. "Why do you feel like you need to change it?"

"People don't see my work as innovative," they replied, "and I feel like I'm viewed as a less intelligent, reflective and valuable person as a result."

This was hard to hear. I repeated it to myself in my head for days: *I feel like I am seen as a less intelligent, reflective and valuable person because my art is not perceived as innovative*.

I wanted to tell them their worries were unfounded but I knew there was truth to what they said. Aesthetics play a subtle, unacknowledged role in the distribution of social capital in the school. Many students, myself included, feel pressure to create interesting, contemporary proposals to earn approval from peers, coaches and administrators. Social groups can be influenced by aesthetic values and admired performances can raise one's standing in the social hierarchy. This linkage between aesthetics and social dynamics is healthy to a certain extent, as people with similar artistic preferences often share similar values, but it can make people feel the need to conform to a certain aesthetic to have their social needs met. It can also reduce innovation to the pursuit of current trends.

The way performance features in the structure and culture of the school exacerbates this issue. Opportunities to present self-authored work are infrequent so they inevitably feel high stakes.[13] The curriculum focuses on solo work which brings the self into focus. As much as presentations give students the opportunity to practice creating and performing, they also serve as a chance for them to explore their artistic identities. It can thus feel like the self is the primary source and subtext of every creation. This shapes an environment in which what one creates is taken as a reflection of who one is as a person. Virtually no separation is made between art and artist. Critiques of art thus feel like critiques of the self. Every performance accrues to one's image, slowly accumulating into a personal brand.[14]

As someone who thinks deeply about art and self, this quickly made creation into an overwhelmingly high stakes task. Over time, I came to feel like all I was expected to do with every presentation was prove how cool I was. Between this social burden and the repeated mandate to innovate to stand out professionally, my desire to innovate slowly curdled into obligation. While I still sought change for deeper political reasons, it became impossible to disentangle this impulse from the onus to innovate for self-promotion.

But sometimes I have something else to say besides "look how unique, tasteful and talented I am."

At ENC, the focus on differentiating oneself through innovation shapes daily training practices. Nowhere is this clearer than in my specialty classes. My major is aerial hoop, which is an apparatus with a low technical floor and wide range of physical options, making it a discipline in which excellence is measured as much in originality as athletic difficulty. Generating novel, useful ideas and tricks is one of the main focuses of my training. This is what I love most about aerial hoop, but it can make for lonely work. At ENC, despite having classes together where we are rigged side by side and share a coach, I almost never train with other aerial hoop artists. We put in our headphones and passively ignore each other, letting the coach navigate the strange dance of shifting between our personal islands. We don't train this way out of competition—we simply take for granted the idea that our main goal should be to invent and amass a bank of unique, impressive skills that each of us alone can do. In fact, there is such a focus on technical differentiation in aerial hoop that it often feels like *the entire point* of the discipline is to *not* share material.

This quest for innovation and uniqueness (in aerial hoop and beyond) is positive insofar as it frees students to follow their own physical and creative impulses, but it is not without consequences. It shunts artists into a race for differentiation that precludes collaboration while doing nothing to assuage the psychological burden of comparison and competition. This generates a territorial culture where movement is seen as property, difference is treated as an asset and personality is reduced to a resource for developing a marketable, signature style. As an aerialist, I have often felt that becoming "increasingly me" is both the de facto aesthetic goal and the path to becoming hirable.

At ENC, innovation occupies a polyvalent niche: as much as students venerate it as a disruptive ideal, they also experience it as a daily obligation. The notion that innovating can help one stand out echoes throughout the school: it is often perceived as a professional advantage, a pedagogical goal and a social asset. It is rooted in the very dramaturgy of circus as a form. Many students internalize the value of innovation and aspire to embody it. Somewhere along the way the line between the freedom to express oneself, the desire to redefine circus for the community and the pressure to stand out to meet one's economic needs blurs and just doing circus is no longer enough.[15]

As I got deeper into my time at school, I began to question the way innovation is defined and valued in circus. Informed in part by the reading I was doing for this study, I realized that none of the movement generation I was doing was innovative in the disruptive sense. It was just more of the pursuit of exceptionalism that undergirds much of circus—in other words, conservative innovation. The

corrosive pressures of my context had diluted the ethical concerns that initially led me to pursue change until the desire to be known as an avant-garde creator became my main motivation for innovating. I realized that to seek the type of change I wanted, I would have to question my most fundamental beliefs about circus, especially my desire to be a unique, special artist.

I set myself the mission of innovating in a disruptive way that was not about enhancing my value as an individual. I became obsessed with finding ways of conceptualizing movement beyond the drive to be impressive and unique. At first this was exciting. I'd been searching for change since I arrived at school and suddenly, by naming and questioning the conservative role of innovation in circus, I was having real ideas about how to go elsewhere.

Quickly though, the questions overtook me. One question led to another until nothing remained certain. I felt isolated, with no sense of what I wanted to do in hoop, let alone why I did circus at all. I became completely lost. Every day, I'd arrive at class, sit down on the mat and face the void. I'd warm up distractedly, spend twenty minutes checking in with my coach, watch other people train and then fall into a listless attempt at movement. Without the underlying goal of hunting for innovative, unique and impressive material, I no longer knew how to go about doing circus.

In my first year, my attempts to innovate had given me a feeling of specialness that helped me hold on to my self-confidence in a school full of talented people. What I was up to in my second year, however, was both a direct refusal of the codes of conservative innovation and a task that produced no short-term results. It was uncomfortable in a way that signaled deep unlearning.

When it came time to create an act, I decided to make a number about surrender in order to make friends with this discomfort. I wanted to surrender the idea that every act had to simultaneously show off my best technique, subvert artistic expectations and promote my good taste and personality. I wanted to deconstruct exceptionalism, not only in how I staged technique but in how I approached aesthetics too. I planned to place a few life-size, looping videos of my body in passive positions in the hoop around me on stage in order to foreground a sustained passivity impossible for me to produce live. To accomplish this, I'd requested the use of one of the school's stage lights and three projectors.

When I met with two school administrators to discuss the equipment I would need, they said no. For the most part, I understood their reasoning. It would be entitled of me to get angry because the school is not designed around my interests, particularly when they involve expensive equipment. There was one comment, however, that irked (and fascinated) me. Several times, one of the

administrators stated that while my project was likely interesting, it was "a digital media project, and here we want to concentrate on circus acts."

I was baffled. Without asking me anything about how video fit into my number, they rejected it as "not circus." The casualness with which they made this definitional claim made me feel as if they were dismissing not only my request but my entire way of seeing circus. It was as if the boundaries of circus were so self-evident that they didn't even perceive what they were doing as restricting options.

While ENC encourages creative experimentation, there are limits to the type of innovation it is able to support. This can leave students who desire more radical change in the odd position of feeling encouraged to innovate yet caged within a restricted terrain of experimentation. In the absence of vocabulary to distinguish different visions of innovation, it can be hard to name the fact that the type of innovation that school is set up to support can't contain what many students desire. For those with perfectionist tendencies like me, this unacknowledged clash of definitions can create a pressure cooker of ambition without outlet. It can lead some students to blame themselves for "failing" to innovate in ways the context does not support.

Within this context, even students with an interest in disruptive innovation often chose not to pursue it. Despite the administration's best efforts to lower student stress, the elite nature of the context makes every performance feel high stakes. This discourages artistic risk taking and turns "failure" into something to be avoided instead of a healthy part of the creative process. Disruptive/artistic innovation unfolds less predictably than technical training and, in a pedagogical context where constant improvement is the expectation, this can make it feel like an unreliable investment of time. Technique is concrete in ways that make it easier to hold up as a shield against imposter syndrome. Artistic innovation, in comparison, is circuitous. The feelings of lostness it can engender are treated as cute and important but only if resolved quickly. Given how vulnerable this process is, it's no wonder that students rarely find the time or energy for the slow fermenting of creative work.

Regardless of its desires, the school's ability to support artistic innovation is hampered by its need to use its limited resources to achieve its pedagogical goals. A conventional vision of circus is built into the physical architecture of the building and the way time is allocated towards different curricular activities. ENC is primarily designed to help students create solo acts. The fact that our specialty classes are mostly solo/small group classes, and we present only once a semester in the form of a traditional seven-minute act, makes other types of work difficult to produce. The spaces and groups we are assigned to work in make site-specific, long form or collaborative pieces, and creations with developed scenography hard to arrange. While many students and administrators are

working to create more space for experimentation at ENC, what they can achieve is limited by available time and space and the inertia of established structures.

Furthermore, ENC can't abandon its current structure to prioritize disruptive innovation without undercutting its broader mission. The school's purpose is to prepare students for successful careers in the circus industry, not to redefine circus. As much as it aims to help every student to become the artist they desire, and invests in helping its graduates to become changemakers in the field, it also has a responsibility to equip students to succeed within the industry. It cannot discard existing circus norms nor ignore the appetites of the market. The school receives direct bureaucratic, political and financial pressure from other actors in the industry (funders, companies, the ministry of education) that fence in its aesthetic approach. It thus faces the difficult task of negotiating between student dreams and market realities, balancing aesthetic innovation with commercial viability. This is one of the fundamental tensions of arts education which institutions and students alike confront.

The challenge ENC faces in balancing student desires with market standards became clear to me when a casting agent from a prominent Canadian circus company came to visit our career skills class. Innovation, they claimed, is something they and other companies feel they must pursue to remain relevant. They are always hunting for it, so being innovative is one of the best ways to gain an advantage in the casting process. As much as they want to hire innovative artists, however, they also counseled against focusing too much on it. "Innovation," they amended, "should never come at the expense of quality. Our priority is still to hire technically well-executed acts and innovation should never undermine that."

This comment was a gold mine for me. I turned the phrase over in my head: *innovation is essential but it should never come at the expense of quality*. What did they mean by quality? What aspects of the form were they treating as non-negotiable, naturalizing by framing them as "technically well-executed?"

This episode confirmed for me what I had always felt and often been told: that innovation is a professional asset in Western contemporary circus. At the same time, it helped me understand how much of a distance there can be between the different understandings of innovation that animate the circus world. Conflicting goals collapse easily under the flexible opacity of the term "innovation."

While disruptive change might beget social rewards, conservative innovation is more apt to lead to professional ones. Too often, what the market demands is novelty without change—innovation for innovation's sake, or rather, innovation for profit's sake: novelty that entices ticket buyers into spending extra for a front row seat to the future. In the professional market, it is not the changemakers but

the performers with the highest level of technique and greatest conformity to aesthetic norms who move through the economic circuit with the least friction. This sentiment isn't just in my head: towards the end of my second year, a coach initiated a conversation about whether I should focus less on artistic content for my graduation number than I had for previous acts in order to improve my hireability by aligning more with industry norms. At school, various forms of innovation can be rewarded but in the professional sphere, the dominant demand is for conservative innovation that fits easily into existing productions and satisfies audience expectations without destabilizing circus's focus on exceptionalism.[16] The sort of innovation that doesn't compromise quality.

In December of my second year, despite being denied the technical support needed to realize my complete vision, I presented my number about surrender, in which giving up the need to prove my worth through artistic innovation was both the principal goal and content of the piece. After the performance, I asked one of the school's artistic counselors for feedback. They began by congratulating me for creating such an innovative piece. They then proceeded to tell me that what they appreciated most was how much my personality shone through. They told me that the details of the content weren't that important because my idiosyncrasy and inventiveness captivated the audience on its own. The proposition was so unique, they said, that it became about me. They said word for word, "*you are the product*."

I laughed out loud when I heard this remark. For most students, it would be a delightful comment. And I did feel flattered but perversely so, as my appreciative feelings were overshadowed by my disappointment. For me, this comment was a bittersweet confirmation of my fears. I had created a number specifically about surrendering the need to make every act an innovative representation of myself and people applauded it for being *innovative* and *about me*. In many ways, creating something more mainstream would have been more effective. I was caught in my own trap. My desire to question innovation led me to be read as innovative precisely because I was questioning innovation.

I spent my first two years at school tearing myself apart to become an innovative creator. When I first arrived at ENC, it was with the conviction that I could not go on doing circus as before. I found the dramaturgy of mainstream circus violent and migrated towards contemporary works in search of a way of doing circus that reflected my values. At first, this process was enjoyable. My desire to create experimental works came first from a real love of the process. Yet over

time, the imperative to innovate overtook this motivation, draining the process of much of its joy.

The combined forces of my ambition, ENC's elite culture and the pressure of the market caused a slow implosion. By the time I reached the midway point of my time at school, I often approached innovation as a *should*—something I had to do to have my needs met. The fun was still there but underneath it was a thrum of obligation, perfectionism, insecurity and fear. The need to create acts that are correct and cutting-edge had become so non-negotiable that I disregarded my mental health to do so. Just doing circus without trying to redefine it no longer felt like an option.

In January of my second year, I had the chance to catch up with an old friend whom I hadn't seen in five years. We'd done circus together in high school and both gone on to attend circus school in Canada but had lost touch. We met at a cafe and, after ordering food, took a table by the wall where I sat facing a row of butterfly photographs that looked like stock images but which were likely the work of a local photographer. As I grazed on my lukewarm quiche, my friend, Ernest, recounted the events that had led them from our last meeting to the present:

> In 2020, I was so unhappy at school that every Friday I left not knowing if I'd return on Monday. When the pandemic hit and we were forced to go home, I was not upset. I was deeply relieved. I quit circus for a year. My body hurt. I was exhausted. The way I'd been training was unsustainable and unaligned with my values. I could not go on doing circus as I'd been taught, as the culture demanded, so I just stopped.

"But you're doing circus again now, right?" I questioned.

> Yes. Eventually I got back into it but I am very stubborn about working from my values now. Part of that has been getting out of the Quebec circus scene. After school, I needed to perform for real people—to get out of the insular pressure of the community and use my skills to entertain non-circus people. These days I enjoy just doing my technique for people who've never seen it before and letting them take joy from that. I cannot work against myself anymore. I don't want to normalize pain anymore. If I'm in pain, something is wrong.

The self-possession of this statement left me feeling disoriented, like I had just stepped off a treadmill and had yet to readjust to the normal physics of the world. I heard behind Ernest's words a relief I hadn't known was possible. I saw myself in the future looking back on the conversation: little overly ambitious Sarah, staring at an oversaturated close-up of a caterpillar, something big and small and vital reverberating through their flesh.

Hearing from Ernest, someone whom I respect, that they have chosen to forgo the pursuit of innovation was enormous. The idea that I could just do some technique for ordinary people, rather than trying to make my mark on the Montreal circus scene with some revolutionary artistic piece, was deeply relieving. Here was someone whom I admire who had chosen to focus on technique, not because they had internalized colonialist or capitalist values like mastery and discipline, but precisely because they had unlearned the pressure to push through unhealthy limits. For Ernest, it was not a sellout move or an unquestioned default stance. On the contrary, they settled into it precisely as a strategy of resistance—as a way of finding wellbeing within an oppressive system. In a culture that demands rupture, growth and optimization, the default mode can be a wise and life-giving response to the world.

Therein lies the irony of my situation. I thought I could outrun capitalist ideology by eschewing the pursuit of athletic virtuosity that characterizes mainstream circus. In replacing technique with innovation, however, I was simply dressing the problem in a new, edgier fit. Underneath my supercilious good intentions, I was still creating with one goal in mind: to prove my specialness to myself and others by surpassing limit after limit. When I first started school, I had seen contemporary circus's focus on innovation, authenticity and difference as the antidote to traditional circus's obsession with athletic virtuosity, but over time, I came to see them as two sides of the same coin.

All that being said, I am not going to give up on innovation. I still desire artistic innovation and have faith that it can be a healthy, refreshing activity.[17] Circus needs change. I just no longer view innovation as inherently more resistant than the pursuit of technical exceptionalism. Nor do I see innovation, as I once did, as an urgent and useful lens through which to consider art. Innovation is mostly irrelevant to the real work of nourishing subversive dramaturgical approaches and healthy creative communities in circus. This equanimity is liberating.

Discussion

Western contemporary circus's focus on aesthetic innovation is celebrated by people in diverse positions within the community for its promise to replace the normativity of traditional circus dramaturgies with a celebration of authenticity and difference. In professional circus education, this shift is applauded for empowering students to take ownership over their creativity and express their unique selves. While there is truth to this optimistic story, this autoethnographic

account reveals that it does not adequately explain the complex way students experience the call to innovate. Taking twenty-first century market ideology into account helps explain the shifting cultural pressures that shape the way contemporary circus artists relate to innovation.

As much as championing freedom of expression gives the illusion of fighting against repressive forces, conformity is no longer the dominant social pressure in most of my circles and, in fact, at École nationale de cirque, there is at least as much pressure to differentiate oneself as to conform. Contemporary circus has attempted to leave behind the problematic elements of its inheritance but it has not outpaced the status quo. Instead, its embrace of authenticity and uniqueness—the very values that supposedly set it apart from traditional circus's capitalist, colonial history—reflect the twenty-first century post-Fordist obsession with the commodified self.

Today we live in what scholars cheekily call "late capitalism," an era characterized in the West by a globalized, post-industrial attention economy in which everything, including not just material resources but immaterial goods such as art, lifestyle and identity, has become commodifiable (Espinoza). Factory labor has given way to post-Fordism, a way of structuring "production based on strategies of permanent innovation, mobility and change, subcontracting, and just-in-time, decentralized production" (Hearn 202). While this shift purportedly increased the agency of workers, it has also led to a decline in the steady (if alienating) jobs of the mid-century and a rise in part time work and freelance gigs (Vujanović and Cvejić 41). The ideal laborer is no longer a stolid company man but a passionate entrepreneur who resembles—and, many argue, is directly modeled after—the figure of the artist (Jackson). Someone who "prefers to be mobile and values a good quality of life above high or stable income . . . permanently on holiday but managing the work 24/7 all by themselves" (Ritsema 37).

The precarity of this labor arrangement, which makes individuals responsible for providing many of the benefits once assumed by employers, is masked by a "new spirit of capitalism" (Ampuja 20) which wins people's commitment to the system by turning work into an arena for self-actualization (Cvejić and Vujanović). Post-Fordism teaches individuals that they are essentially inadequate and thus motivates them, through an internalization of the mechanisms of power, to become model laborers to prove their worth to themselves (Cvejić). Driven by their own fears, the post-Fordist subject

> internalizes the performance discipline, epitomized in Should, and turns it into compulsive freedom, encapsulated in Can, in training to be able to perform everything with self-imposed industriousness and deceptive feeling of freedom, as working hard is felt like one's own choice (Vujanović and Cvejić 43–44).

Thus post-Fordism harnesses people's desire for autonomy and self-expression to recast the isolating instability of twenty-first century labor relations as freedom (Jackson 22). It aims to "keep workers invested in corporate functioning by addressing each worker's subjective sense of self and identity, soliciting them to express their uniqueness and tying that to corporate objectives" (Hearn 204). To remain competitive in the market, individuals must now curate themselves as products, using their personalities as a resource to construct a personal brand and demonstrate their value as entrepreneurial subjects. This is especially true for artists who, in part due to social media's growing importance, are expected to design and mine their entire lifestyles to promote themselves as artist-as-products (Agulló 18; Vujanović).

By making individuals feel they are inadequate unless they exceed expectations, post-Fordism enlists laborers in producing an increasingly entrepreneurial labor force by convincing them to "freely" strive to innovate. The responsibility to innovate has been downloaded onto the individual who must now curate itself as a product through a combination of self-actualization and self-exploitation (Hearn 197; Vujanović).

In other words, for twenty-first century artists working in Western, post-Fordist contexts, innovation and self-expression no longer represent acts of resistance but are precisely what the market demands. Contemporary circus's focus on innovation as individual freedom is not the liberation it purports to be. It reflects the pressures of the market as much as traditional circus's performance of innovation once did. In crowning uniqueness and innovation as the antidote to traditional circus's focus on virtuosity, contemporary circus has not so much reduced the form's focus on exceptionalism as redirected it to a vehicle more appropriate to twenty-first century market forces. Contemporary circus may contest technical virtuosity but in its place it turns personality into its own spectacle (Kann 4) and aesthetic innovation into its own form of prowess.

Conclusion

At École nationale de cirque, the influence of post-Fordism on contemporary circus is reflected in the way students experience the call to innovate. While many students aspire to innovate to disrupt aesthetic norms, they can also feel pressure to do so in order to feel good about themselves, earn approval from peers and stand out in the market. This is exacerbated by the way post-Fordism turns innovation into a personal responsibility and asset, something one must "freely" aspire to pursue under the guise of self-optimization in order to remain competitive on the market. As these impulses enhance and distort one another, what begins as a voluntary pursuit of creativity can quietly morph into

a self-disciplinary ambition. There is a fine line between the freedom to innovate and the imperative to set oneself apart. In a community full of talented people, the two often coexist, good intentions merging with ambition to transform freedom into compulsion.[18]

Despite all this pressure to innovate, students interested in disruptive change can find their efforts stunted as circus institutions, including schools and companies, are rife with structural, ideological and economic constraints that limit the type of innovation they are able to support. Circus institutions must distribute their resources to best achieve their missions, including preparing students to be hireable and creating shows that will sell on the mainstream market. Conservative innovation, which delivers novelty without demanding change, is typically more economically viable than its disruptive counterpart. Pursuing conservative innovation can help students stand out on the market.

Navigating the conflict between these desires, incentives and constraints can cause students anxiety—especially those interested in aesthetic change. Encouraged to innovate to stand out yet held back from doing so in ways that question the boundaries of the form, students can find their disruptive impulses slowly diverted into the project of self promotion. The promise of innovation as a liberatory act gives way to its role as a tool of capitalist discipline, leaving students to grapple with the tension between their artistic ambitions and the realities of the system they inhabit. The result is that innovation is reduced to a personal responsibility and asset—a tool for individual survival within the system—rather than a generative activity that creates a more capacious future for the whole community.

In his book *Betraying Ambition*, Diego Agulló writes: "What if to say 'I have the ambition to change the world' would be a paradox? What if in order to change the world nobody would need to be ambitious?" (57–58). I'd propose that the same may be true for innovation. What if to bring about change in circus, we first need to stop trying to innovate?

Notes

1 The shift in project focus was supported by senior members of the administration at École nationale de cirque. The study was not a school assignment but a paid position made possible by the funding and mentorship of the Research Center for Human Potential (HUPR). Beyond the initial conversation to determine the subject matter and confirm that the project would not interfere with my studies, the study was conducted with complete academic freedom with no connection to my coursework, oversight from the administration or bearing on my educational standing.

2 I chose to use the term "innovation" as my guiding term instead of "creativity" for several reasons. Firstly, I was explicitly asked to study innovation, which itself reveals the relevance the term has within the ENC community. It plays a significant enough role in contemporary circus rhetoric to offer an interesting trace to follow.

Secondly, "innovation" evokes the idea of progress in a way that "creativity" does not. It implies a judgement about value and futurity that can weigh heavily on students. Thirdly, innovation is a sustaining value of capitalist and colonial ideology. Numerous scholars have connected traditional circus's focus on innovation to this history and, by adopting the term, I build upon this literature to expand the discussion of how innovation continues to shape circus in the present.

3 A significant body of scholarship exploring innovation and creative economies exists in the literature. The purpose of this study, however, is not to provide a scholarly overview of the role of innovation in circus but to untangle its resonances within a particular context. A broader analysis of how innovation features in circus education, which considers innovation across diverse contexts and engages more closely with existing scholarship, including formal definitions (Glăveanu; Glăveanu and Beghetto; Runco and Jaeger), presents a fruitful avenue for future research.

4 The vocabulary I offer emerged in the analysis process as a useful tool for making sense of the local patterns within the data. It is grounded in the particularities of this study. It may have useful applications in other contexts, but further research into its resonance with existing terms and theories in creativity studies is needed to consider its broader applications.

5 In outlining the difference between conservative and disruptive innovation, I do not mean to imply that one is better than the other. Conservative innovation often serves enriching purposes in people's lives. Many circus artists, including a significant number of my peers, are not interested in disruptive change. Some care little for innovation while others seek out the professional advantages that innovating in conservative ways can provide. I wish to defend the validity of their interests as much as my own. I offer this vocabulary to help tease apart how contradictory impulses can disappear into the opacity of the term "innovation." This creates space to consider the struggles of students interested in disruptive change but also reveals the way that pressure to innovate harms students who are less interested in this goal.

6 The Kanien'kehà:ka Nation is recognized as the custodian of the lands and waters of Tiohtià:ke, which has long served as a place for numerous First Nations to live, meet and exchange. The Anishinaabe Nation also has an important relationship with the territory, which they call Mooniyang.

7 In addition to its geographic specificity, the study is particular to the time period of its undertaking. As student cohorts cycle through the institution, coaches come and go and the administration updates the curriculum to best achieve its mission, the culture of the institution changes to reflect the aspirations and values of those who animate it. The study is also grounded in a past version of myself, whose struggles and desires are made no less real or useful by the fact that I have already begun to outgrow them.

8 As an autoethnographer, I can only claim to have interpreted one reality, grounded in the specificities of my own experience. My goal is not to propose a universal theory of innovation in circus nor do my methods permit it (Pace 8–9). The insights I offer are not objective truths that I plucked from the world but ways of seeing that emerged from the data as useful interventions into how current rhetoric fails to account for students' lived experience. Knowledge which takes seriously the situated, multiple nature of truth, is not only valid, but a necessary intervention into Modern epistemology with a well-established history in the literature (Haraway; Saint-Amour).

9 In acknowledging my positionality, I do not mean to reify identity as a stable essence. On the contrary, autoethnography is a coherent mode of analysis precisely because

it posits the self as "an ongoing project – as shifting, contradictory, multiple, fragile, fragmented . . . 'co-implicated' with others and with the world" (Gannon 43). To write through the self is not to reify the self as a bounded, liberal human subject but to deconstruct it by admitting the obliterating extent to which we are always already products of context, formed in and through relations, at the mercy of phenomena far greater than ourselves.

10 I say that contemporary circus focuses more on aesthetic innovation than previous circus genres because this story forms an important part of contemporary circus's self-mythology. The dramaturgical experiments of the past tend to disappear into the certainty of hindsight, so it is possible that presentism exaggerates this story. Determining whether contemporary circus is truly more open to aesthetic experimentation than traditional circus, however, is a) beyond the scope of this project and b) less interesting to me than the question of how this story affects people's behavior. Facts are important but so is acknowledging the way that fact and fiction flirt in the construction of lived experience.

11 While technical and aesthetic conformity is becoming less of a focus in many professional circus schools, in other Western circus subcultures, such as the growing aerial competition and influencer communities, the normative aesthetic codes and technical hierarchies of circus are not loosening but becoming increasingly codified and enforced.

12 Though not all students are interested in contemporary aesthetics, a significant enough faction is dissatisfied with the current state of circus for the desire for change to be an animating force within the school's aesthetic ecology (Richard et al. 228).

13 Our presentations double as evaluations so there is some real need to demonstrate one's talent. This certainly doesn't help presentations feel low stakes, but the school is aware of the issue and actively working to shift the culture and pedagogical framing of the exercise to reduce student stress. While the fact that presentations are graded makes for an easy scapegoat, there are other, slipperier forces that shape the stakes of performing at school.

14 This situation is exacerbated by the fact that students are almost all at a stage of life where they are trying to find their place in the world and thus feel driven to try to leave their mark. Simply being young adults makes it harder for them to defend themselves against pressure to innovate.

15 Of course, some degree of pressure and competition has always, and will always, be part of being a performing artist—part of being a human, period. My goal is not to naively try erasing all forms of competition but to help disarm this pressure by bringing it into open discussion.

16 Even circus companies are not acting unhindered. In much of North America, the general public has a limited, spectacularized vision of "the circus" that constrains the kinds of shows that can be produced. The space for change is delimited by audience expectations which are slow to evolve and near impossible for an individual artist to influence. That being said, while accessibility is essential, it is often more caution than fact that keeps people from challenging audience expectations. Without nuanced reflection, prioritizing palatability can ultimately serve a populist, conservative agenda (Lesage).

17 I have no desire to see ENC place less emphasis on innovation. On the contrary, I am capable of bringing forward this critique precisely because I have had the privilege of studying in a school that supports aesthetic diversity. Free from the need to chip

away at restrictive conventions, I have been able to ask what else is needed to take us one step further.

18 Feeling pressure to innovate, I'd wager, can be particularly burdensome in circus as compared with other performing artforms because in circus, artists both create novel pieces and perform them with their own bodies. We are both artist and art, painter and paint, idea and medium. This is one of the things I love most about circus—that even when there is a director, the performers are always, by necessity of the individuality of what we do, implicated in the creative process. But when we do both at once without recognizing the double burden this imposes, we are made all the more vulnerable to the post-Fordist pressure to perform the self as an aesthetic object.

Acknowledgments

This article would not have been possible without the support of my colleagues, family and friends. I am deeply grateful to my mentor, Melanie Stuckey, for her steady guidance and insight, and to my father, Curtis Bohlen, for his generous and patient support throughout the writing process. I would like to thank Tim Paradis, Julie Théberge and Amiel Ross Soicher Clarke for their thoughtful editing as well as the many friends who offered reflections, encouragement and welcome distractions along the way.

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