

STRENGTH ARTISTS AND FEMALE PORTERS: VERSIONS, INVERSIONS AND TRANSVERSIONS OF THE FEMININE IN CIRCUS

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This article explores gender roles in circus, focusing on women who challenged traditional norms of physical strength. From a historical perspective, examining the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the study investigates how strength performers like Sandwina and Miss Lala challenged gender stereotypes by performing traditionally masculine roles. Additionally, it discusses excess as a central element in circus practices, concentrating particularly on excess of strength. Strength, an element associated with masculinity, is appropriated by female Hercules and female porters in performances that destabilize gender hierarchies, proposing new forms of expression. The study adopts Charles Feitosa's pop-philosophical methodology which uses the concept of "transversions" – ways of crossing and shuffling cultural hierarchical dichotomies. Contemporary cases are also analyzed, such as Raphaela Olivo, Francine Rosa and the respective collectives they are or were part of.

Cet article explore les rôles de genre dans le cirque, en se concentrant sur les femmes qui ont remis en question les normes traditionnelles de force physique. D'un point de vue historique sur la fin du XIXe siècle et le début du XXe siècle, l'étude examine comment les artistes de force comme Sandwina et Miss Lala ont défié les stéréotypes de genre en jouant des rôles traditionnellement masculins. En outre, elle aborde l'excès en tant qu'élément central des pratiques du cirque, en se concentrant plus particulièrement sur l'excès de force. La force, un élément associé à la masculinité, est appropriée par les « femmes Hercule » et les femmes porteurs dans des performances qui déstabilisent les hiérarchies de genre, proposant de nouvelles formes d'expression. L'étude adopte la méthodologie pop-philosophique de Charles Feitosa, qui propose des « transversions », c'est-à-dire des manières de franchir et

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de déplacer les dichotomies hiérarchiques culturelles. Des cas contemporains sont également analysés, tels que Raphaëla Olivo, Francine Rosa et les collectifs respectifs dont elles font ou ont fait partie.

Keywords: strength artists; female porters; excess; transversions; circus; artistes de force; femmes porteurs; excès; transversions; cirque.

Introduction

This investigation analyzes gender roles in circus, focusing on women who primarily challenged norms in circus disciplines by showcasing strength performance. The hypothesis extends to the present, considering that gender constructions are permeated by paradoxical meanings ranging between conservation and rupture. Therefore, this article spans from female strength artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who performed in Europe and the United States, such as Sandwina, considered the world's strongest woman in 1910 (Goellner and Fraga 78), to currently active female porters.

Through a historical and contemporary perspective, the study examines how these women disturbed gender expectations through the excesses inherent in circus activities, especially in the exercise of physical strength, as tools of affirmation and artistic expression. By analyzing their performances, the article aims to indicate these artists' importance in building a more diverse and inclusive circus scene, challenging gender stereotypes and expanding performance possibilities in circus.

This article is part of a broader body of research that also connects circus, gender and excess. In general terms, it addresses the potential reinventions of the feminine in circus through its necessary relationship with excess, analyzed from three aspects: excess of strength; risk, considered for research purposes as an excess; and excess in general as constitution of difference.

The tradition of strength as associated with one pole of gender binary can be traced back to ancient Greece where war and sport, with similar disciplines, became exclusively masculine practices. Throughout Western history, force and its constellation of characteristics, such as courage, virility, power and endurance, were incorporated into a socialisation process according to gender norms. When appropriated by women, especially in proportions exceeding masculine standards themselves, the nonconformity becomes more evident.

Risk manifests as excess because it is understood as voluntary exposure to limit-situations. The most apparent meaning relates to physical risk which is "real, tangible, and non-negotiable" (Mandell 73). In almost all circus modalities, the body's integrity can be compromised and, at an extreme point, there is the contingency of its finitude, even though the discipline and rigor of training tend

to prevent injury or fatal accident as much as possible, as Luiz Guilherme Veiga de Almeida points out.

On the other hand, when gender expectations are frustrated, risk takes on a more social tone. A female body with masculine characteristics generates a deviation from the norms of dual hierarchies, stretches and transforms these limits into more malleable boundaries. In all these aspects, excess contains the potential for reconstruction, reinvention and the constitution of difference.

Excess, whether as modes of existing or as modes of artistic creation, mobilises limits, expands boundaries and inhabits them. It can lead to transgression, not as an end, but as part of the process of deviation and overflow. Its most interesting effect, however, lies in the possibility of seeking affirmation of difference. Therefore, when female artists invest in the excess of force, for example, they tend to destabilise the boundaries between masculine and feminine, mixing them and creating new and more authentic means of expression and ways of living.

The present study is conducted by a hybrid research methodology, that is, it uses historical, comparative and diachronic research, supported by concepts, especially philosophical ones. Primary and secondary sources were analysed, as well as bibliographic references under different conceptual perspectives. However, as one of the main guiding methodologies, the article uses pop philosophy, developed by Brazilian philosopher Charles Feitosa, which proposes recognising, identifying and seeking ways to escape hierarchical binaries in Western culture.

Pop-Philosophical Methodology

The expression “pop philosophy” was mentioned by Deleuze in the 1970s, reflecting on the counterculture movement of pop art in the 1950s and 1960s. These reflections can be found in *Difference and Repetition* (1968) and in the text “Plato and the Simulacrum” from *The Logic of Sense* (1969). Pop art proposed a line of flight from within the system in an irreverent, rebellious, joyful and critical manner (Feitosa, *Transversões* 47). From this new sensibility, Deleuze was inspired by the possibility of a pop philosophy. With this approach, Deleuze was not focused on creating a concept, but rather on developing a way of thinking that challenged traditional closed philosophical dialogue. In other words, he proposed a philosophy that was open to non-philosophy, one that was traversed by the world, contaminated by it and capable of contaminating it in return. As far as concepts are concerned:

In fact, sciences, arts, and philosophies are all equally creative, although only philosophy creates concepts in the strict sense. Concepts are not

waiting for us ready-made, like heavenly bodies. There is no heaven for concepts. They must be invented, fabricated, or rather created and would be nothing without their creator's signature. (Deleuze and Guattari 5)

Furthermore, in his critique of Platonism and its concept of representation, which starts from a world divided and hierarchized between essence and appearance, intelligible and visible, original and copy, Deleuze proposes an escape from this mode of understanding. In one of its senses, pop wouldn't mean a superficial and quick way of dealing with philosophy; rather, it suggests mutual contamination between knowledge fields, their anti-hierarchization, and indicates the equally creative potential of each of them. In this sense, no knowledge would be instrumentalized in favor of philosophy but hybridization itself would create more and better ways of inhabiting the plurality and complexity of knowledge (Feitosa *Transversões*).

Various pop philosophy initiatives have emerged influenced by Deleuze's project, each in its own way. In the United States, there is the successful "Popular Culture and Philosophy" series organised by philosophy professor William Irwin. Charles Feitosa appropriated the term to develop an approach simultaneously concerned with philosophical and conceptual rigour, while being permeated from the start by popular knowledge, science, art, philosophy, marginal and non-Western knowledge and attempts at decolonizing life.¹ It is important to emphasize, as Feitosa pointed out, that the aim is not to create a "Deleuzian" pop philosophy, but rather to take advantage of its creative and experimental character (Feitosa, *Transversões* 51).

More specifically, Feitosa's pop philosophy methodology aims to identify traditional hierarchical dichotomies of values to then create "transversions." Typical of Western culture, these dichotomies follow a logic where one pole is considered superior to the other, such as mind vs. body, human vs. animal, masculine vs. feminine, subject vs. object, individual vs. society, same vs. other or culture vs. nature. In this sense, "versions" would represent the dominant tendency of dualities that "tend to privilege the identical over the different," such as the prominence of human over animal, reason over emotions or everything masculine in relation to feminine. Conversely, "inversions" "represent various historical attempts to reverse the poles, often without questioning the dichotomies or inherent hierarchies themselves." Inversions are important and have the potential to destabilize these hierarchies; however, they also risk increasing disparity and expanding it. Therefore, instead of alternating within binary logic—a tendency of modern and avant-garde thinking—pop philosophy proposes creating ways to traverse or shuffle it, so that it ultimately loses its strength and centrality. This is the idea of transversion. The prefix "trans" carries an ambiguity

of meaning, signifying both “to go beyond” and “to be traversed by,” since it is impossible to exit metaphysics, to be “outside” (Feitosa 48, 201).

Circus, Excess and Gender

Most circus disciplines involve practices and dynamics of excess. They share the body's exploration of anti-natural or anti-normative possibilities, which involve risks, above all physical risk, pushing the limits and exhausting repetitions aimed at improvement, often only visible in the long term. Citing an observation by Luiz Guilherme de Almeida, “there is no ‘mild’ way to become an acrobat” (208). This means, taking acrobatics just as an example, that excesses are present in multiple layers of circus arts, not just in performance acts, but throughout the entire process of learning techniques, conditioning and physical preparation.

Generally speaking, excess can be understood as “a particular magnitude or over-abundance of ‘something’ on a predetermined scale.” But it doesn't just mean “the opposite of a lesser amount, or lack of ‘something,’ but also what is considered beyond a particular understanding of moderation or balance” (Tavin et al. 1). Particularly in this last aspect, excess aligns with transgression, not in the usual sense indicating surpassing, violating or breaking limits established by prior norms. This transgression refers to inhabiting limits, to excess as expansion. In circus practices, the body is the very raw material of artistic endeavour, implying its radical modification in the constant negotiation/inhabitation of limits and exposure to risks.

In this sense, the excess of the circus body conflicts with a conception of the normative human body. But this dimension coexists with the discourse of the extraordinary, where one faces superhumans, endowed with qualities and capabilities of bodily control and gravity defiance. This approach to the ideal of physical perfection is eventually amplified into abstract ideals. As Peta Tait points out, “notions of a transcendent spirit arise from muscular power and control” (36). Moreover, speaking about spatial transcendence, the author recalls its relevance to the Western modernist ideal, as Mary Russo named the “aerial sublime” in her book about the feminine grotesque:

The role of the sublime in this study is highly qualified by “aerial”-a term I use to designate a zone which is at once historical and imaginary. As historical, it belongs to the late-nineteenth and twentieth century preoccupation with modernity and the specific technological contents of those Futurist aspirations for progress, associated with spectacle. As imaginative, “the aerial sublime” posits a realm of freedom within the everyday.

For latecomers to the scene of political identity, freedom as expressed in boundless flight is still an almost irresistible image. (11)

This spatial transcendence, identified with aerialists like flying trapeze artists, can also appear as a remnant today. Conceptions of excess as a disruption to the normative body and those of transcendence and freedom often appear simultaneously in circus performances, generating conflicting reactions in their reception, such as aversion and admiration. However, when introducing a gender perspective, these issues become more complex.

During the nineteenth century, Victorian² conceptions deeply influenced by the bourgeois and patriarchal view of society, deepened the distinction between feminine and masculine, drawing also on scientific-biological support. Masculinity is reaffirmed through attributes of courage, vigor, activity, creation and associated with public and outdoor life. Feminine characteristics are referred to roles socially imposed on women, such as domestic chores and seclusion, gracefulness, delicacy, refinement, sophistication, passivity, including the preservation of moral, religious and social values. They share an accessory condition to the masculine aspects (Parker and Pollock 9, 12).

In this sense, excessive strength can communicate conformations and deviations to cultural models, especially when considering a gender-aware perspective. Artists with large or resilient bodies, possessing vigor and power abilities sometimes regarded as bizarre, traveled different parts of the world and gained recognition and notoriety during the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. During this period, they challenged gender expectations in society at large and their respective roles within circus arts structures by performing inversions of typically masculine functions.

Female Hercules and Porters: Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

During the late nineteenth century, there was a wave of female strength artists called strongwomen and female Hercules who circulated in circuses and venues such as fairs, *café-concerts*, music halls, vaudeville shows and theaters, primarily throughout Europe and the United States. They performed acts where “they would lift, push, or bend seemingly unbreakable and unbendable objects” (Chapman 32). In general, the terms “female Hercules”, “strongwomen” and “forçudas” are used as equivalents to refer to artists in the strength work category. The term “forçuda” is used by Brazilian researchers Silvana Goellner and Alex Fraga.

Specifically, regarding the term “female Hercules”, direct references can be found in circulation materials from the period. David Chapman mentions several cases: an 1897 lithograph titled *La Femme Hercule* that shows a woman lifting a man in a porting trick (59); Athelda, an artist of Belgian origin who toured in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries throughout Europe and North America under the title of female Hercules (62); and Elvira Sansoni, an artist of German origin known as “the greatest female Hercules of modern times” (101). The term was also used by French researcher Natalie Coutelet to refer to artists of the same category in her study on Leona Dare and Miss Lala. Some of these women also worked as porters in an inversion of a function traditionally performed by men.

Porting is a practice of collective acrobatics where one person functions as a base or porter for another, the flyer. Typically, the larger person (porter) supports the smaller one (flyer) in strength balances or even launches and/or catches them in acrobatic movements. However, there are also cases of people with similar body structure and strength partnering, where these functions can sometimes be interchangeable within the same act.

These strongwomen and female porters performed classic hand-to-hand numbers, static and flying trapeze and iron jaw, among others. Their performances pleased and provoked audiences, critics and the press, indicating a presentation with paradoxical layers of meaning. This is because their performances took a certain risk by blurring the well-defined gender boundaries established by Victorian conceptions, generating fascination while simultaneously creating uneasiness, curiosity, doubt and enchantment.³

There is a conceptual, functional and historical difference between female Hercules or strongwomen and female porters, although the same person might perform both functions. The strongwomen of the second half of the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century performed, as mentioned, in circuses and alternative spaces, accomplishing the most eccentric feats: lifting various types of objects, destroying and bending others, juggling weights as well as lifting other people.

Contemporary displays of strongwoman performers in these formats are not as common. The term “strongwoman” is now associated with strength athletics, a sport that tests athletes’ maximum strength and physical endurance through a series of trials, depending on the events, that:

combine static tests of strength, such as the deadlift and overhead press, with more dynamic tests of strength, which combine strength, power, speed, and endurance; for example, the farmers walk, and the vehicle pull. (Newman 12)



[Figure 1 Katie Sandwina, the Lady Hercules (holding up three men), George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2014686831/>.]

However, as Newman points out, the female strength athletics subculture has been marginalized. While *Strongman* was organized in 1977 with the *World's Strongest Man* competition, the female variant only emerged in 1997 (Newman 12). Currently, the sport has expanded to other divisions and female participation has increased considerably. According to the *Official Strongman Games* website, in 2024, more than 400 athletes from thirty-five countries competed for the "World's Strongest" title.

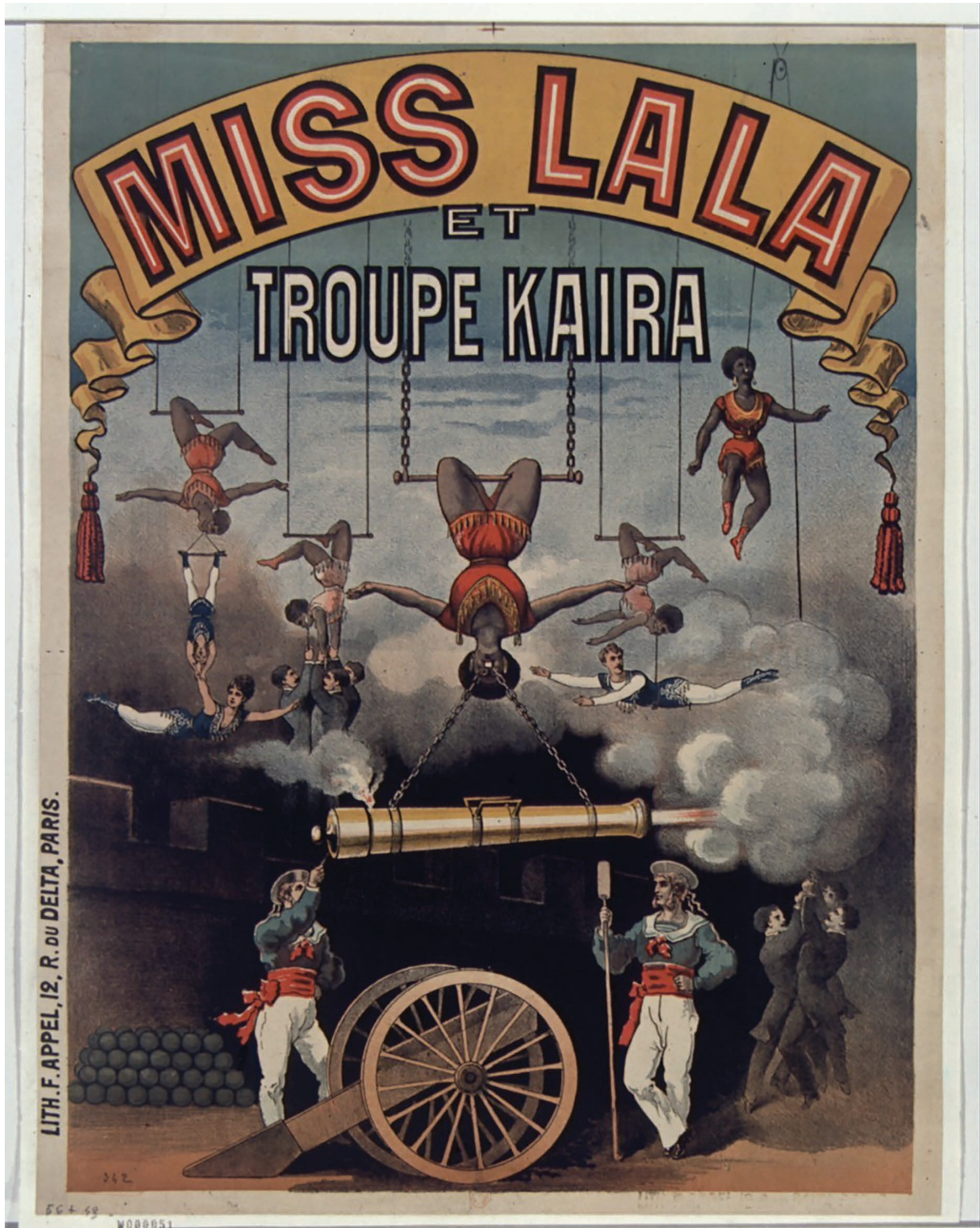
Among the major references of the early twentieth century, Katie Sandwina (see Figure 1), the stage name of Catherine Brumbach, stood out as a weightlifter and strongwoman who became a main attraction, occupying the main ring of Barnum & Bailey Circus in the United States in 1910 and 1911 (Todd). She also served as vice-president of the Women's Equal Rights Society of the same circus in 1912 (Todd 26). Born into a circus family, she began her strength training as a child alongside her three sisters. All of them became strength artists (Goellner and Fraga 79).

Among her sisters, Barbara (Babette) and Maria Brumbach formed The Braselly Duo. Jan Todd reports that they were even stronger than Sandwina, but being smaller and of similar weight to her, they did not achieve the same appeal (Desbonnet cited by Todd 13). The Braselly Duo presented strength acts with balance porting.⁴

Around the same period, in the late nineteenth century, but in the field of aerial acrobatics focusing on strength displays, Miss Lala, stage name of Anna Olga Brown, and Leona Dare, born Susan Adeline Stuart or Stewart, were static trapeze porters specializing in iron jaw (see Figure 2). Basically, with variations, Lala performed hanging upside down by her knees from a trapeze bar, supporting another trapeze by iron jaw where a flyer performed aerial acrobatics (Tait). In her act, Leona Dare supported her partner, even performing in a hot air balloon where the trapeze was suspended below. Adding to the trick but increasing its difficulty, Lala carried two men by her arms and a third by iron jaw (Tait).

Gertrude Leandros, daughter of a strongman, inverted traditional roles in porting with her partner in The Leandros Duo, performing strength-based porting in the early years of the twentieth century. Common for strength artists of the time, commentaries highlighted her muscular development, particularly her arms and legs (Chapman 86). It was also common to advertise these attractions as "unique", despite several professionals performing the same modalities and techniques. This marketing strategy emphasized the novelty and, more than that, affirmed the difference, curiosity and even rarity of these inversions.

In general terms, it can be said that all these performers challenged nature in two ways. First, through the very objectives of circus arts, which seek to explore anti-natural or anti-normative possibilities of the body (among excesses, risks,



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

[Figure 2 Miss Lala et Troupe Kaira, Poster from 1879; Gallica; Bibliothèque Nationale de France, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9003086r/f1.item.zoo.>]

pushing limits and repetitions). Second, through the tension they created with naturalized gender patterns in a society permeated by Victorian values and the rise of biological scientism. Georges Canguilhem's reflection on monstrosity, monsters and norms includes the problem of size and indicates the frontier between the enormous and the monstrous:

Both refer to what lies outside the norm. The norm which the enormous defies is supposedly a mere matter of measurement. In that case, why is it only what is large that we register as enormous? No doubt because, at a certain degree of growth, quantity brings quality into question. Enormity tends towards monstrosity. This is the ambiguity of gigantism: is a giant enormous or a monster? . . . If the human being is defined by a certain limitation of his forces, his functions, then the man who, by his size, escapes human limitations is no longer a mere man. Yet to say that he is no longer a mere man is to say that he is a man still. (187–188)

The exhibition of strongwomen could also take place in alternative spaces to the main circus tent. Thus, the inversions of functions linked to gender roles generated much admiration but also, to some extent, monstrification, especially when displayed in sideshows, alongside freakshows, where people with non-standard bodies were exhibited as freaks of nature or anomalies. Contrary to the fascination generated by female artists with passive and graceful postures, who entertained the audience by smiling, waving and parading—and were therefore considered beautiful—these performers frightened audiences and were closer to abnormalities (Adams and Keene 132).

Katherine Adams and Michael Keene state that these strength artists impressed their spectators in their “unnatural pretension to masculine attributes” (139). The act of inscribing such attributes on the body, like strength and muscular development, signified a disruption of the norm through excess. It is also necessary to consider that this inscription exceeds the masculine measure itself, as the average man is not expected to be capable of performing actions like those of strongmen as well as most circus acts.

More broadly, in strength demonstration and skill modalities, including sports, male artists and athletes perform the versions. Therefore, any performance that deviates from this standard is prohibited or viewed with estrangement. An example of adherence to this version in Brazil can be confirmed in the publication of Decree-Law No. 3.199 on April 14, 1941, by former president Getúlio Vargas:

Article 54. Women shall not be permitted to practice sports incompatible with the conditions of their nature, and for this purpose, the National

Sports Council shall issue the necessary instructions to the country's sports entities. (Brasil)

This article, most famous for implementing the ban on women's football, remained in force for over forty years—until 1983. In 1965, during the military dictatorship, the National Sports Council deliberated the prohibition of “practice of fights of any nature, football, futsal, beach football, water polo, polo, rugby, weightlifting and baseball” (Brasil, CND, 1965 as cited in Franzini 325). Medical, biological and critical discourses aligned with this version justified the exclusion through women's fragile physiology, in addition to the potential damage to their reproductive health that such practices would entail (Franzini 321).

The essentialization and universalization of the feminine nature's fragility would then justify implementing the prohibition. The Brazilian government of the time was aligned with decisions about women's participation in the Olympic Games. In the first modern Olympics, held in 1896 in Athens, women were not authorized to participate. In the following edition, held in 1900 in Paris, women were only permitted to participate in tennis and golf, without, however, allowing them to compete for medals or have formal registration. Such practices were supposedly appropriate for the feminine nature, as they demanded grace, softness and beauty, even though competitiveness was considered a masculine characteristic. The feminine nature would be at odds with modalities and practices involving “direct physical contact, a certain degree of aggressiveness, and possible demonstration of physical strength” (Vieira et al. 528).

All this discussion encompassing a perspective of masculine privilege establishes a version of gender duality that engenders a corporeality aligned with these ideals. Therefore, standards with the same content also permeate circus arts, where bodies are in action, beyond aesthetics, transmitting cultural conceptions of both “spectacle, transgression and danger, as well as physicality, identity, nature and freedom” (Tait 6). In modern North American circus, versions of the feminine were seen on stage, as can be seen from the study by Adams and Keene, such as ballerinas, parading in costumes, or as *tableaux* models—described as “women posed topless and nearly bottomless as nymphs, Venuses, or maidens, generally covered in thick white greasepaint to create a marble look” (86). Additionally, women could be found as assistants/adornments for tricks performed by men—like magicians and knife throwers—and some styles of aerial acrobatics, as in the example of aerialists who used enormous butterfly wing costumes, suspended by cables through iron jaw, not without contradictions.

Despite all these versions, there was still space for inversions in the circus scene. In Brazil during the period of sports prohibition for women, female football and wrestling were interestingly exhibited in second circus sessions (Bonfim 77). As an example, Neirud “The Gorilla Woman” was part of a female wrestling

group and also worked as a trapeze porter, performing in circuses in the country from the 1940s (Viana).

In Sandwina's case, the inversion appears in her very name. Eugene Sandow, a popular strongman since the late twentieth century, performed in public strength demonstration events, developed a muscular physical training system and was considered a pioneer in bodybuilding and physique training. Catherine Brumbach reportedly defeated him in a challenge, lifting a weight of 136 kilograms overhead while he could only raise it to chest level. From then on, she became a double of Sandow, adopting the stage name Sandwina (Goellner and Fraga 79).

Inversion is a threat that may not always be effective but already establishes conflict, discomfort and resistance. Not accepting the hierarchy also generates reactions. For example, in Brazil in 1939, an endocrinologist published an article in the *Physical Education Magazine* of the Army Physical Education School in Rio de Janeiro that stated:

the adoption by women of habits and practices typically linked to the masculine universe could lead to a process of sexual undifferentiation. This would result in both the atrophy of ovaries and their functions and the alteration of female endocrinology in general. (Vieira et al. 532)

Beyond the social threat of sexual undifferentiation, other effects can be observed. Jan Todd highlights the influential relationship between Sandwina's performance and the power of persuasion regarding women's equal voting rights: "more than one reporter suggested that Sandwina was proof that suffrage could work, that 'the female Hercules,' was a living argument in favor of equal franchise" (7).

Although the phenomenon of strongwomen has diminished in prominence over time, their historical contribution remains undeniable. They opened new paths for future generations to present on stage and to condition and train the body for activities traditionally restricted to men. This influence extends to female athletes and the creation of new ways of constituting subjectivities, politics and collective relationships.

Contemporary Female Porters: Between Inversions and Transversions

Strongwomen emerged in a specific historical context and, due to changes over time, gradually withdrew from the scene in their characteristic period formats. Given the differences between strongwomen of the nineteenth and twentieth



[Figure 3 “Koley Sisters at Weltweihnachtszirkus, Stuttgart”. Photo by Reiner Pfisterer, 2024.]

centuries and today’s athletes, and to continue investigating the movement of destabilizing gender roles in circus modalities and functions involving high-performance physical strength, this section focuses on female porters.

With knowledge of strength artists from previous centuries, we can understand that they challenged the limiting values of conceptions of the feminine and “demonstrated new ways for women to express themselves through bodily reform” (Bieke 25).

Today, we question whether female porters are producing similar effects through their actions, how they direct the creation and production of their artistic work and whether gender issues affect both artistic creation and the field of work. Finally, we seek to understand, according to the pop-philosophical proposal, the possible inversions and transversions provoked by female porters and their partnerships.

In the style of The Braselly Duo, others emerged. In the 1980s, the Portuguese Alexis Sisters stood out, with members Dulce Lorador as porter and Anabela Lorador as flyer. They performed a classic and masterful number of strength and balance porting, much more common among male duos. They won the Silver Clown Award at the 1981 International Circus Festival of Monte-Carlo (Colombo). Currently, we can mention the Koley Sisters (see Figure 3), also specializing in

strength and balance porting techniques, performing a number in Cirque du Soleil's *Mystère* show. The duo, composed of Bulgarian sisters Michelle Kolev as base and Nicole Kolev as flyer, was awarded the Golden Clown Award at the 2024 edition of the Monte-Carlo festival.

As a reference from Brazil, we can cite Raphaela Olivo who has been involved in various works, forming duos and groups since her graduation from the National Circus School of Rio de Janeiro in 2017. With DuoVerse (see Figure 4), she performed a typical inversion, working as a porter for flyer Nicolas Mancisidor. Their show *Habitual*, which premiered in 2020, presents the interpretation of a couple's daily life and challenges, aiming to enhance "feminine strength" and break male stereotypes ("Habitual"). Among object manipulations and acrobatics, Raphaela Olivo also ports on static trapeze and, on the ground, in hand-to-hand and head-to-head techniques. Beyond the thematic proposal itself, what draws attention to the traditional role inversion is the size difference between the two performers. In *Habitual*, there isn't simply a role inversion; there is also a direct intention to question both gender stereotypes.

In a trend of exclusively female groups, we note the performers of the "Moulin Rouge" act presented in the special March 2023 edition of *Cabaret* dedicated to women, at Circo Crescer e Viver (Circus to Grow and Live) in Rio de Janeiro. The act emerged as a continuation of a small piece created for the National Circus School of Rio de Janeiro's graduation course in 2022. Among the porters were Francine Rosa and Caroline Meurer. The objective was to bring only women on stage, performing feats traditionally executed by men. Currently, both Francine Rosa and Caroline Meurer are part of the Picoá Women's Acrobatic Collective, also in Rio de Janeiro. Unlike DuoVerse, this group is exclusively composed of women. It is conceivable that the inversion performed by these artists, between porters and flyers, may arise from the need to project women performing jobs and functions that still retain traces of limiting gender conceptions, confirming the influence and social permeability of this version tradition today.

All the cases mentioned so far can be understood as inversions because they share the characteristic that gender is still central to the performance. Gender roles are inverted because women begin to perform the strength work of the porting base, traditionally executed by men, or circus modalities of strength exhibition and performance are appropriated by women, as in the case of the Braselley Duo, the Alexis Sisters and the Kolev Sisters. However, each of these inversions presents its own singularity. In female duos performing balance and strength routines, the message conveyed is one of equal capability. In all-female groups and in duos with female porters and male flyers propositions, there is a more noticeable alternation of who is permitted or suited to possess strength—who will hold ownership over the development of physical strength. The following case presents itself as a transversion because gender ceases to be central,



[Figure 4 "DuoVerse in the Show *Habitual*", DuoVerse Cia Circense. Photo by Danilo Ferrara, 2023.]

giving way to function—that is, to anyone who potentially has the capacity to be a base and perform the most demanding work of strength.

Copenhagen Collective, located in Denmark, where Raphaella Olivo and Nicolas Mancisidor are current members, premiered their first show, *The Genesis* (see Figure 5), in July 2024, and subsequently began touring Europe. The thematic proposal includes “the eventual acceptance of the need of the Other,” which “brings jubilation as we discover and experience the fact that as humans, there is little that one person can do by themselves alone” (Copenhagen Collective). Apart from conceptual criticism, what indicates a transversion is the indifference to gender markers for executing porter and flyer functions. Furthermore, the focus on the star, the extraordinary individual, becomes diffused among various people. Several tricks only become possible thanks to collectivity. This is a common characteristic among circus collectives and companies; however, gender transversion is not so common. A similar example, but one that remains predominantly with male porters, are the shows by Compagnie XY.⁵ In Copenhagen Collective, people of all genders perform all porting functions, as porters, middles and flyers. The middles generally have an intermediate physical structure and can act as both porters and flyers. In a pyramid, they occupy the middle position, that is, they are flyers of the base and at the same time carry another flyer.

In this sense, the movement realized by Copenhagen Collective appears to liberate physical strength, as well as its constellation of attributes, from gender dichotomy. Strength appears appropriated neither by the masculine nor the feminine but comes to be understood as an element of development beyond this binary. Gender remains but no longer operates in a binary key; there is a traversing of the concept.

Final Considerations: How to Porter the Paradoxes?

This article sought to analyze gender roles in circus, focusing on female artists who challenged the masculine tradition of physical strength and its related characteristics. It emphasized how strength artists, especially female Hercules and porters, challenged gender stereotypes by appropriating characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity and reinterpreting them, thus contributing to the construction of a more inclusive and diverse circus scene.

Strength, the central element in the analysis, was explored as a constitutive and difference-affirming excess, through which the artists reclaimed spaces previously dominated by men—physical spaces in the strictest sense, such as stages or circus rings, but also social and somatic spaces, implementing the legitimacy of exhibiting muscular strength and the actions it enables.



[Figure 5 Copenhagen Collective in *The Genesis* from Luke Chadwick Jones; Baltoppen LIVE, 3 July 2024, https://baltoppenlive.dk/arrangement/the-genesis_4/.]

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that historical emancipation does not follow a straightforward progressive trajectory. In today's world, despite significant equality achievements, gender hierarchies still interfere in the creation and reception of circus performances. As a result, the field is permeated by disputes over the legitimacy of ownership of the development of bodily strength. Role inversions, such as porting performed by women, can still be perceived as exceptions, revealing the enduring cultural norms that link strength exclusively with masculinity.

The emergence of such inversions reveals the somatic potential of strength independent of sex/gender issues. On the other hand, initiatives such as Copenhagen Collective demonstrate transversions, in which gender is not an important category, giving way to personal capacity and collective collaboration. In this sense, the pop-philosophical methodology allows for the recognition of the limitations of the gender binary logic, as well as the potential of going beyond it, within a perspective that relates strength, gender and circus arts.

Strength and its dimension of excess, as a characteristic of these arts, are situated within a field of dispute that is mapped not only through role versions and inversions, but also through transversions that emerge in contemporary circus practices where strength is decoupled from gender markers.

Finally, this article points to the need for continued investigations into the potential of transversions in circus arts and particularly the strength-based arts that comprise it. Throughout history and in the present day, strength artists demonstrate that circus can be a space of reinvention and affirmation of difference. By developing unique artistic singularities, they promote greater plurality in circus arts, where bodies and their performances challenge not only gravity but also the conceptions that limit human expression.

— Translation from Portuguese by Marta Cotrim

Notes

- 1 Charles Feitosa published the article "O que é isto - Filosofia Pop?" [What is This - Pop Philosophy?] in 2001 and wrote the book *Explicando a Filosofia com Arte* [Explaining Philosophy With Art] in 2004, which became educational paradigmatic material. It presents an introduction to philosophy in a "pop" style, aimed at a lay audience of all ages. In Brazil, Marcia Tiburi's *FILOSOFIA POP - Manifesto em 16 teses* [POP PHILOSOPHY - Manifesto in 16 Theses], published in 2012 in *Revista Cult*, is also notable. In addition, there is Marcos Lopes' podcast, *Filosofia Pop* [Pop Philosophy], created in 2015, which now has more than 200 episodes. For a more detailed contextualization, it's worth consulting Marcos Lopes' text, "O que é filosofia pop?" [What is pop philosophy?], published in February 2025 on the Itaú Cultural website.
- 2 Victorian conceptions emerged during the reign of Queen Victoria in the United Kingdom (1837–1901). They marked a deepening of rigidity in the division of social roles

based on sex/gender, reinforced by the cultural, religious and scientific codes of the time. Its geographical scope went beyond English territory due to the height of the British Empire's expansion and its power of influence over its colonies, Europe and the United States. South America was also affected because of the globalization of this cultural expansion.

- 3 On the paradoxical meanings generated by the presentations of female strength artists, see my analysis of Maria Spelterini and Ella Zuila's passage through the city of Rio de Janeiro in "Maria Spelterini e Ella Zuila: atravessamentos entre o circo e o teatro no Rio de Janeiro do século XIX. XXIII Colóquio do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Artes Cênicas: Léa Garcia, Aderbal Freire Filho e José Celso Martinez Corrêa: Euridice, Apolo e Dionísio das artes cênicas brasileiras". Rio de Janeiro: Ed. dos Autores, 2024. [Maria Spelterini and Ella Zuila: Traversing Between Circus and Theater in Rio de Janeiro in the 19th century. XXIII Colloquium of the Graduate Program in Performing Arts: Léa Garcia, Aderbal Freire Filho and José Celso Martinez Corrêa: Eurydice, Apollo and Dionysus of Brazilian performing arts].
- 4 A photograph of the Braselley Duo published in the National Police Gazette with the title "Muscular young women whose act is very much out of the ordinary" can be viewed at: <https://www.roguefitness.com/theindex/history/the-braselley-sisters>. Accessed on 02 Aug. 2025.
- 5 Between the writing of this article and its publication, Raphaela Olivo also joined Compagnie XY.

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