

Michael Eigtved

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Juggling rings into birds

By Michael Eigtved

In an interview, Annesophie Bergmann Steen, then head of the Academy of Modern Circus, Copenhagen, Denmark, said about the process of developing new acts with the students: "...often we work with the understanding of a "language" first. For instance, how it is to work with this: "the simple" or "the bombastic" on the floor. What will those who see it experience? In that way we create a base ... and *then* we take it into the disciplines."¹

This was at the core of the academy's work with their idea of "theatrical innovation", which was also the topic of a research project I undertook there from 2017 and on. In the project, I investigated the structural and meaning producing changes of the students' approach to their own work, and how these changes would result in continuous developments of their graduation performances.

The artists were thus consciously working with a language (which was conceived of, as being on a more general level than the languages functioning within their individual disciplines) where meaning was seen as and produced by understanding and mastering a cultural code. This made it viable for me to work academically with an analysis of their performances as well as their relationship with the materials they use, which set off from this idea. Materials would be their bodies, tools like Chinese pole or, as in the case I will pursue later, juggling rings of a flexible plastic material. This analysis took not only their performative and aesthetic qualities into consideration, the cultural codes so to say, but also reconsidered, what could be gained by including a semiotic approach to specific elements in the presentations, and certainly

1) In an interview given to Michael Eigtved September 5, 2016, as part of the research for the report (Eigtved 2016), translated into English by the author.

therefore how the materiality of the different kinds of props and tools, would be integral to the meaning and experience of the performance.

For the purpose of this article, I will later focus on the Czech juggler Filip Zahradnický and his graduation performance *Vermilion* (2018), where he explores how his up to 6 red, plastic juggling rings can be used both for traditional ring juggling and – when handled innovatively – can be turned into “birds”, with a life of their own. This happens when he, during the act grabs three of the rings with one hand and shakes them so they perform the image of a bird beating its wings. Through the act, the rings are alternately being juggled (i.e. thrown one by one in the air in sequences) and caught again in a way, where they in that specific moment appear in the shape of the “bird”. The playful investigation of the materiality of the rings becomes an interesting innovation of the concept of juggling through the transformation of the rings from tool or prop to an animated puppet.²

Theatrical Innovation

The AMoC approach was very much the product of the academy’s ideas about developing a new attitude towards being a circus artist. The staff team were obviously all aware of the fact that circus demands discipline; it demands skills that are the result of almost endless training, repetition and maintenance of acquired competences, not least those regarding the materials applied in the discipline. Being an academy for *contemporary* circus, however, they wanted to build an education, which incorporated the characteristics of new circus in the daily programme.

This included the above quoted work with “languages”. Certainly, it also included a not so often forwarded concern with the artistic acts as they would be experienced *by the audience*. (Traditional) circus artists often have their focus on performance in the sense of being physically able to perform the tricks, routines and sequences expected from an artist working in the discipline in question. More often than not they are focussing on the difficulty of the act, rather than on its aesthetics or what experience it produces, and

2) Filip Zahradnický’s graduation performance is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yBY3frEoOA>.

thus rarely on the experience, the effect or affect, which the specific act would have on the audience. Excepted from this is the “wow” effect, which is broadly acclaimed also in traditional circus. At AMoC the students were taught both performance analysis and an awareness of the fact that performances are really only meaningful, when they have an audience.

On an overall level, the education at AMoC concerning the stage art aspect, however, was placed in a field based on two principles in perpetual exchange: The first principle had to do with developing the crafts and the technical skills. Here circus educations do not differ much from other physically based, artistic educations (especially in opera and ballet) that also have a clear focus on physical-technical skills, and on the mastering of these as the essential condition for the enterprise.³

The second principle had to do with the element, which in the school’s context was labelled a focus on scenic presence. An important part of this was teaching the students to use their competences in the transformation of ideas and materials into new forms, working freely, and developing the ability to experiment by using artistic competences innovatively.

It was between these two principles, the education balanced. To some extent the challenge was to avoid them being oppositional, as “measurable” and “not-measurable” respectively; or as an opposition between those basic elements of technical and physical skills (which are comparable across schools and artists) and the parts of the artistic expression, that are more immaterial, and less governed by normative standards, and therefore difficult to establish measurements for.

The following are some initial points on the work with the development of approaches to being a circus artist, and the relation of this to materials, based on my engagement as a researcher working from the inside of the academy (Eigtved 2016, 4-6).

Today circus as an art form is still defined and valued on the degree of sensations presented in the performance, on (pure) technical skills, and on what one might call “the art of the impossible”. It is thus necessary to make the students able to meet these expectations through mastering their

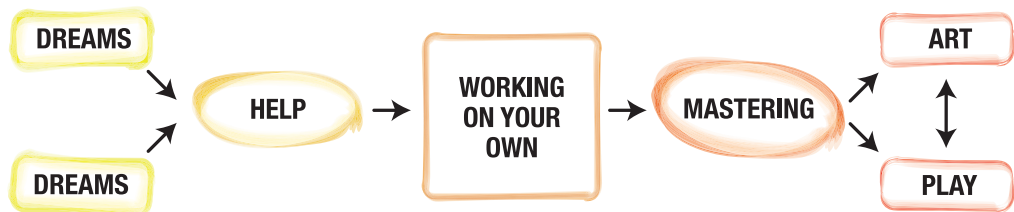
3) This description of the school’s work is an elaboration of the status report (Eigtved 2016, 3).

disciplines and the materials they involve at a high level, to enable them to enter an arena where those qualities are foregrounded.

When it comes to contemporary circus, however, it is essential that the artists are able to develop new ways of seeing both their own discipline and circus as an art form. Therefore, beside mastering a discipline at a high level, the students are taught to develop a creative consciousness and awareness of how their skills in combination with experiments with materials and tools, can create a new kind of experience for an audience.

The creative moment in this investigation of the art of circus and the use of materials, that took place on AMoC, can be perhaps best summarised in the concepts of translation and transformation. It was through structured work, both practical and analytical, that the students' abilities as theatrically innovative artists developed. Methodologically the students were trained through working with translating a concept like for instance "swollen" to circus art. That is working on what this concept could cover as a scenic category, but also investigating what ideas the concept could trigger within their respective disciplines

The approach towards generating skills can be illustrated in a model developed by one of the teachers, Rasmus Aituganov:



The starting point is always the students' own dreams and wishes about what to accomplish within the discipline and their work with the material. To realise these dreams help is needed. This can be very concrete (lifting, supporting, securing etc.) but also inspiring through the above mentioned work with concepts, feedback sessions, discussion etc. After this first help comes a phase, where the students can begin on their own, meaning both working up routines and doing repetitions to master certain elements of for instance a specific trick, but also the experimental element, where the range of possibilities with

the material are investigated. (This is where Filip Zahradnický's "birds" came into being). Finally in a last phase, the student arrives at mastering both the act and the skills involved.

This opens for the possibility to try out, what the new skill or act could become in a new context; what happens if music is added, or another artist, or if a new concept ("the bombastic") is used as direction for the act. It is a point in this way of thinking about development of both technical skills and the theatrically innovative contexts, to be conscious about the fact that some things are on a mastering level, while others are on their way, and yet everything can always be challenged and translated.

Participatory research

I was initially called in to teach performance analysis the way we do it with undergraduate students at Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Copenhagen. The idea was to give the academy's students tools to both investigate the aesthetics, character and meaning production in contemporary circus and give them a possibility of making a performance analysis of their *own work* later on, in order to develop the theatricality in it.

The overall aim was to make the students reflect on the possibilities of their discipline not in the sense of developing it *technically*, but focusing on *theatrical* innovation, the kind of storytelling, aesthetics or affective impact that could be developed and refined as part of the creative process with the act and the investigation of tools, props and materials. In Bergmann-Steen's words: "Experimenting here means: working with the circulation and translation of material." (Eigtved 2016).

This may sound a little banal, but those aspects are very little foregrounded in traditional circus training, perhaps because it requires elasticity in the view of the specific discipline and the nature of its inherent qualities.

After being part of the teaching staff for some time, I – and the academy – developed an interest in a further investigation into the nature of the work that students and staff were undertaking. We recognised a need to be able to articulate more precisely, what was actually going on, and to develop formats

for using an academic reflection as feedback on the processes along with the more technical, circus skills-based approach to innovation.

In the first parts of the project, I worked with an outset in ideas about an ethnographic approach to the collaboration between artists and academics, which had been presented to me during a visiting professorship at Performance Studies at University of Sydney. The department had a studio performance space, where companies were invited to rehearse an upcoming performance and researchers and students then observed the developments, writing logbooks, analysing their findings, and then finally discussed it with the artists when the rehearsal period was over.⁴ Since I was to be more actively part of the process of developing the performances, giving feedback a number of times both on ideas in writing and on presentations during the rehearsal period, I found that another approach than the observing anthropologist was necessary. This led to an approach inspired by the methodology developed by Dorthe Refslund Christensen, Ida Krøgholt et al., which is described and conceptualised in an article from 2016 (Christensen et al. 2016). I found, that their idea of “accompanying research” would be a way of taking a more suitable position as a researcher inside the academy. The authors write about the concept: “The term ‘accompanying research’ derives from the Danish term ‘følgeforskning’, which does not have a direct English equivalent. For us the idea of accompanying each other is an important aspect of the research-practice relationship that we explore (...)” (Christensen et al. 2016, 117). This very concrete idea of going together along the way of investigation, was what took place in the processes, we did at AMoC. Following the above-mentioned principles for the education and the academy’s approach to the students’ work, it was indeed a collaboration among equal partners, where the basis for all decisions was that there were no given objectives for the work except that it should be interesting for an audience to experience it.

Ida Krøgholt has in a second article given a presentation of the structure underlying a process of accompanying research, suggesting it is twofold and that both parts would be necessary to implement to make sure the project is

4) First presented in McAuley 1998.

both consistent and stays within the framework of the methodology (Krøgholt 2016).

First, Krøgholt states, the essence of accompanying research is meetings, where the artists and the researcher must discuss values, terms and directions for the project (Krøgholt 2016, 19). The point is, says Krøgholt, to acknowledge the ownership of the process and its coming into being through a mutual practice and decisions (Krøgholt 2016, 19). A sort of reciprocal contract on the respective contributions to the final results is thus established. In addition, there must be a continuous discussion about how the use of results can contribute to the furthering of the project. This includes, according to Krøgholt, continuous analysis and evaluation of the effects the use of results produces.

Second, there are results which the researcher is responsible for producing, says Krøgholt (Krøgholt 2016, 19). There are analytical points to be shared with the artists and other partners and practitioners, and there are results presented in traditional research fora, like this article in a peer reviewed publication where my observations, analysis and experiences are being systematised and can possibly end as theoretical points.

In hindsight, we followed this double structure of accompanying research, albeit the initiative was taken by the academy as part of a pedagogical strategy, rather than because of an expressed wish from the students. Once we began the project, I did, however, observe the asymmetrical nature of it, and was very aware of the need for discussions of purpose, interests and goals, and of the importance of continuously seeing the project from the students' perspective.

Transition of tradition and juggling utopia

In her book *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan states, that going to the theatre itself holds the possibility of being presented with – as well as being part of – an experience of what she refers to as “intimations of a better world” (Dolan 2015). This is also true about circus. Taking as my example, Czech juggler and student at AMOC Filip Zahradnicky's act *Vermilion* and his playful work around the transformation of the juggling rings – and eventually of himself – into birds, the following will focus on a specific element in the process: the development

of the bird using the juggling rings. This is at one time perhaps as Dolan points out, an intimation of a world where the transformation of plastic into a bird is possible. At the same time *through* the transition of the rings into birds, it allows a window for the audience to reflect on the transience of *meaning* in the situation – not to say after the performance. It is thus an intersection between theatre, circus, material, and artist, which constitutes the experience.

As a scholar of performance analysis, I have a specific interest, which is how I can work with this “bird” and its materiality. I have been part of – and contributed to – the academic journey which performance analysis has been undertaking, from semiotics through theatrical events and the theories of theatricality and performativity towards an emphasis on phenomenological presence, and on material.⁵ Through it all, however, I have been missing a way of analytically handling the specific object, which the transitions of the rings constitute. I am now – for the purpose of this article – arriving at the obvious conclusion, that semiotics in combination with phenomenology is the appropriate framework for working with this material and symbolic “bird”.

What is at stake in this juggling act is – as is the case in most avant-garde inspired performance – also the transition of tradition. In circus, tradition is often almost the determining factor per se, and “messing” with tradition may be seen as betrayal. At the same time, mastering the skills and qualities which a specific discipline like juggling, contortionism, trapeze or acrobatics require, is the backbone of circus as aesthetic product and cultural expression. Therefore, it is mainly the contextualisation of these specific qualities, which holds the possibility of innovation.

It is therefore possible to see innovation (in an understanding of the concept which applies to new-circus) as the development of a *theatrical framework*, (as well as of a consistent and reflected use of performative measures) to create a new circus moment, based on the transition of meaning in the signs produced by the objects involved in the specific discipline. A situation, where the circus skill, meaning here the physical expression of juggling, which

5) This transition of performance analysis can be traced from the ideas of Anne Ubersfeld of reading theatre semiotically (Ubersfeld 1999), through Erika Fischer-Lichte’s focus on the performative and transformative power of performance (Fischer-Lichte 2008), to the emphasis on phenomenology and the concept of presence in the latest work of Willmar Sauter (Sauter 2020).

is deeply rooted in tradition and therefore embedded in pre-fixed meaning, is being loosened from this pre-definition, and set free to be interpreted elastically. The innovation of circus disciplines may practically exclusively be made in finding ways of transforming the meaning of the disciplines' rather fixed expressions, by using a theatrical approach to the performative elements (rather than an idea of expanding for instance the number of rings involved, to *thereby* create an innovative moment.)

The mechanisms behind this may, according to the Danish cultural studies scholar Professor Martin Zerlang in his book *The History of Entertainment* (1989) be conceived of as mirroring or throwing two contrasting albeit indivisible sides of the same cultural element (Zerlang 1989, 18ff).

1. The mirroring (image), concerns the pleasure of recognising ourselves or situations we have experienced. Many entertaining performances like circus, often emphasise recognisability over abstraction, and the possibility of relatively easy recognition of places, people, things or situations is also the scenic strategy of many new-circus performances. This is combined with an element of joy. Confusion or unfamiliarity is produced mainly as a vehicle for turning a situation over with surprise and relief. We are bewildered by the images of for instance Filip being "attacked", but relieved when we can attribute the signs and actions on stage to a unifying concept (when we recognise the birds in Fillips rings).

2. The other element is "throwing", as in throwing yourself into the performance. It is of course related to the Freudian projection, but by using the term throwing, it is suggested, that it is indeed a physical concept as well. In circus often in an understanding of an affective participation in which one might not be actively walking out onto the stage, but one is nonetheless physically responsive to what is happening on stage. A reaction, which in circus is very visible (and indeed audible), for the other members of the audience, and which is an integrated part of the performance itself: It is here the "wow" effects come in.

The classic “ooh and ahh”-reaction, the “wow effect” of circus, is one prominent mode of reacting. But as Australian circus researcher Peta Tait points out: “... while it is possible to claim a spectrum of jolts, gasps, contractions and sighs in the perception of circus bodies, the extent of their arousal and interpretive significance for an individual spectator remains open-ended.” (Tait 2005, 143).

To be submitted to the immediate affect is no doubt an important element in the overall experience, and even one that is sought after and appreciated. This therefore makes up a very important part of the pleasure, or as Tait puts it: “...the immediacy of visceral experience contributes to the reception (...), and therefore also invariably accompanies the perception of a body’s cultural identity.”

Which in this context might translate into the notion that, as you viscerally respond to the performance, you are also inevitably noting the ways in which the body and the material in the performance are coded (Tait 2005). In *Vermillion*, however, and in many other acts, another layer of cultural codes is visible, which interacts with the cultural codes of the body: The establishing of the “language” or codes for “birding”. So where Tait’s point is that the significance of the body for the individual spectator may be open-ended, the use of “birding” aims exactly at closing at least some of these interpretational openings.

This means that the scenic presentation and immediacy of bodily reactions would evoke the possibility of the previously-mentioned combination of experiences, consisting of both the “wow” and of a reflection on the cultural significance of the actions involved. Filip Zahradnicky is thus working in the field, where he by creating and using both his juggling skills, bodily movements, and the material (rings), he establishes both the “wow” and an urge for reflecting on meaning.

“The Bird”

As an example of the urge for recognisability in the actions, we may have an even closer look at the bird. What Filip did in his work with the act was to start from the idea of “birding”. That is, the “language of a bird” as mentioned in the opening of this article.



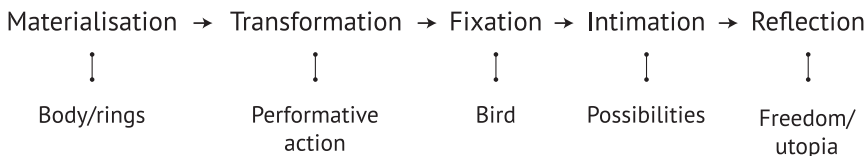
Photo: V. Thénard Béal. Performer: Filip Zahradnický

This meant, that not only did he himself examine the bodily possibilities in for instance moving like a bird, with rapid, jolting head movements, and a jerky walking style. He also examined over a very long period of time, what possibilities the juggling rings could have when the keyword was “bird”. In other words: how he could use the material in a creative process of establishing a consistent “bird” on stage as part of the performance’s idea.

He worked with the sequences, slowly making a montage composed by three elements: 1. the tricks he wanted to be in the act (i.e. how many rings he would be juggling, the routines in which he did, and the references to traditional juggling tricks, which he wanted to present, in order to satisfy both his own ambition of being regarded as a skilled juggler and the expectations of for instance employers at circuses and varieties). 2. The bird-sign-element and 3. A storyline about a man slowly being overtaken and absorbed by his own bird-“invention”.

Through to the work within the Academy of Modern Circus and Filip Zahradnickys *Vermillion*, my research project could then investigate two aspects. First, how the artists themselves articulated what they wanted the audiences to experience and how the use of performance analysis of their continuous realisation of ideas could help the artists to understand their own process; and second, how the realisation of potentials for specific experiences in the final performance would be a result of this process.

In a slightly naïve version, this work, having the rings and their transition as a focal point, may be summed up in what we could call “a chain of innovative steps”:



A crucial element in this process is the establishing of the sign for bird, which then may be the stepping stone to a number of interpretations both of the “bird” which is then established on stage, and of the meaning of birds as symbols (of freedom for instance). My simple, yet at least to myself, slightly surprising conclusion is that through establishing the bird as a sign for bird, I am able to argue much more consistently for an interpretation of this performance as being an intimation of utopia, as suggested by Jill Dolan.

Through a theoretical approach, which aims at defining and to some extent reduce and fixate the performative actions to a specific meaning, I

gain the opportunity to demonstrate, how this is a performance, which can be interpreted as actually opening for the experience of an intimation of something as transient as the sense of coming closer to Utopia. Because I can argue for the sign, and have most people agree that this is a sign for “bird”, which is present on stage then, I can, through this agreement, consider the “bird” a valid marker, and an element in the performance, which I may then consistently build my understanding of the experience of the performance on.

From a phenomenological perspective on the performance, I can to some extent agree with my fellow audience members on what this experience was like, but mainly share the fact that we were there together. Here, however, I focus on a phenomenological approach of what Willmar Sauter calls “perception aesthetics”. In an article he makes the following distinction: “I suggest a division between production aesthetics and perception aesthetics. The former relates to normative, prescriptive instructions of how to create the perfect work of art. Production aesthetics describes genres and styles and purposes for the artist (. . .). In contrast, perception aesthetics deals with actual aesthetic experiences and the circumstances that may lead up to suchlike experiences.” (Sauter 2022, 20). My physical presence, and what happens in me during and after the performance, is shaping the meaning of the sign for bird, and determines how it interacts with the other elements in the performance. It determines how this interplay constitutes an experience of the performance and a specific meaning of the “bird” – which is ultimate mine.

So arriving, perhaps very expectedly, at the conclusion that looking specifically at the material’s possibilities, in this case of investigating an artistic language and its potential, is a useful approach. At the same time, we must acknowledge, that the most rewarding way to proceed is perhaps not to investigate, whether the materiality of an artistic expression has a place in cultural analysis. Rather we should maybe continue to investigate what was to some extent left behind when semiotics lost to event studies and phenomenology, namely the many possible interactions between semiotic analysis of specific elements and a performance analysis, which sets off from phenomenology and theories of theatricality and performativity. Thus, both the significance of how the bird came into being as well as the impact it had on the audience

would be equally important steps on the way to understanding how theatrical innovation in circus artistry is happening.

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