



WORKING WITH CIRCUS ARTISTS: REFLECTIONS ON A PROCESS OF COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH, PARTICIPATION AND COMMITMENT

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ABSTRACT

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE IS TO SHARE SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE LONG RESEARCH EXPERIENCE I HAVE DEVELOPED WITH CIRCUS ARTISTS IN THE CITY OF BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA. THESE REFLECTIONS REVOLVE AROUND THE QUESTION OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, PARTICULARLY ANTHROPOLOGY, THROUGH RESEARCH PRACTICES CONDUCTED IN COLLABORATION WITH ARTISTS. I AM INTERESTED IN RETHINKING THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER BY UNDERSTANDING SCIENCE FROM A CONCEPTION IN WHICH COMMITMENT, COLLABORATION, AND PARTICIPATORY KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING CAN POTENTIATE RESEARCH PRACTICES AND, AT THE SAME TIME, CREATE DILEMMAS AND CHALLENGES. WHAT ARE THE THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE ROLES WE CAN PLAY THROUGHOUT A LONG RESEARCH PROCESS? WHAT ARE THE TOOLS WE CAN USE WHEN CONDUCTING RESEARCH ON THE FIELDS WE ALSO PARTICIPATE IN, SOCIALLY AND POLITICALLY? HOW CAN WE RECONCILE THE TIME IT TAKES TO CONDUCT ACADEMIC WORK WITH THE SHORT AMOUNT OF TIME IT TAKES FOR EVENTS TO UNFOLD IN REAL-TIME?



Introduction

The first time I approached the circus world as a researcher, I was studying anthropology. By the mid-1990s, I was already living and studying in the City of Buenos Aires, Argentina. There, I started learning some circus disciplines such as juggling and acrobatics in one of the many workshops on these artistic practices that began to appear in the city at the time. While I used to carry out those practices as a hobby, by the end of the decade I worked as an artist, having turned arts into an alternative job during one of the worst economic crises Argentina went through at that juncture.¹ Then in 1999, I migrated to Europe to try my luck there. Like many other street circus performers and young people, I was forced to leave the country due to the economic situation. I took part in a Juggling Convention in Grenoble, France, and there I found an innovative space for the production and reproduction of these arts that I had never seen before. When I returned to Argentina, I took part in another convention; this time it was the 4th Argentinean Convention of Juggling, Circus Arts and Street Arts.² Based on these experiences and after confirming that there was a lack of systematic studies on this cultural formation (Williams, 1982), I decided to start doing some anthropological fieldwork around those youth artistic practices, which had renewed circus arts in Buenos Aires.

Two months ago, I found my records of the first fieldwork experience I had seventeen years ago. They were handwritten notes that were not stored on my computer and which I had lost track of. Looking through them, I found the following account of a conversation with a young circus artist I had met a year earlier at a circus meeting in Europe:

He said hello to me and, as I was holding my research notebook, asked me if I was still working on the same thing. I told him I was still collecting data and, on this occasion, I needed to hand in some written observations every week for a subject on research methodology. He recommended some books about circus to me, we talked about other things, and when we exhausted all the topics, I asked him about his trip around Europe, which had ended a few months ago.

P: Well... I visited a lot of circuses, doing more or less the same things you do, but with passion (Extract from fieldwork records, 2000).

The records go on describing the anger I felt because I was a young anthropology student who also felt *part of*, almost like a “native” of the circus universe I was starting to research. While rereading that notebook, I remembered how this episode made me feel uncomfortable, because I was deliberately placed not only in the position of the “intellectual other”, but also of the intellectual “devoid of passion”. It is interesting to analyse this fieldwork record retrospectively and to reflect on the various tensions that are present throughout the research field: inside/outside, “we”/“others”, research/academia/rationality vs. art/passion/feelings, and objectivity/subjectivity.

Due to the knowledge I had acquired at university while studying anthropology, I believed it would be relatively easy to enter the circus arts world in Buenos Aires to conduct my first research on that field. Unlike Bronislaw Malinowski, I was not working with exotic subjects whose cultural patterns differed radically from mine.³ The young artists I would be working with did not speak a different language, and I would not need to travel to some distant land to meet them. Likewise, I would not need to live with them for a long period of time to understand their habits and customs and finally grasp the ‘native’s point of view’ (Malinowski, 1986). On the contrary, I was working with subjects I felt I shared many things with, like our age, our tastes and our lifestyles. They were young people from my own city, and I thought we shared certain principles, experiences and artistic practices that, I assumed, would allow us to be on the same side and think of ourselves as “we”.

However, during those first years of research, I needed to develop some strategies, on a methodological level, in order to understand my position as an intellectual who was not *part of* this cultural formation and also to distance myself from what I found familiar and turn it into something exotic (Da Matta, 1999; Lins Ribeiro, 2004).⁴ Nevertheless, the time, involvement and commitment devoted to an artistic field such as circus arts, which has historically been discredited in Argentina, led me to develop, *together with* circus artists, different strategies to promote these arts, and produce and reproduce them under better conditions.

When thinking retrospectively about my research experience, and particularly about my experience with collaborative research and activism, which I will analyse in this paper, I realise it posed certain risks and potentialities, because, among other things, it allowed me to question and draw attention to the pairing of distance/objectivity as a requirement for knowledge

production. The distance between a “we” (passionate artists) and an “other” (intellectuals), which was put forth in the conversation transcribed above, created a whole line of thought and course of action, which have helped me develop a research methodology throughout my career, since I began studying anthropology. As I will analyse in this paper, the tensions inside/outside, subjectivity/objectivity, rationality/passion became porous boundaries that experienced changes and interpenetrated themselves in my – passionate – search for alternatives to question and reconsider those dichotomies.

In fact, if today I had to define my professional practice it would not be different from the way in which many circus artists define their own practices. As I heard from many artists, one of the things that most often stand out in people who are dedicated to the circus is that there is always “something else” to be achieved, that the circus brings you to “break boundaries”, to “cross borders”. In their own words:

“Each circus discipline has to do with breaking boundaries and moving on for more. This is what happens to the jugglers when we say: I want to throw 9, 7, 5, 3, 1 (...). And so those who do hand to hand are saying: we have to go from hand to hand to foot-hand... And so those who do clown, those who do trapeze (...). Always trying harder tricks” (Narrative of an artist defining the practice, 2015).

This characteristic of circus arts is part of what, in my consideration, resembles my task as an academic researcher. In my career, curiosity, desire and passion always moved me to desire knowing more about the world of the circus artists with whom I worked. And something of this led me to consolidate a work that involved “crossing borders”, or at least forcing its modification, in connection with a sustained task of recording, analysing, historicising and promoting the valuation of a long-delegitimised art in Argentina. This task, rather than being characterised by the intentionality of increasing the accumulation of knowledge, involved a passionate search for mechanisms to promote the enhancement of circus arts, fighting alongside artists.

In this sense, through this article I would like to share some thoughts and questions, dilemmas, challenges and potentialities that I came across during my research experience with a group of circus artists. It began as a mere exchange of information and advice, and then became a collaborative research process (Rapaport, 2007; Álvarez-Carenzo, 2012) and also another step in the direction of political action fighting for the recognition of these arts. The questions in focus are: What are the theoretical-methodological implications of the roles we can play throughout a long research process? What are the tools we can use when conducting research on the fields we also participate in, socially and politically? How can we reconcile the time it takes to conduct academic work with the short amount of time it takes for events to unfold in real-time?

I will answer these questions, or at least reflect upon them, by taking up the notions of “collaborative research” (Rapaport, 2007), “anthropology on demand” (Segato, 2013) or “activist research” (Hale, 2006). These ways of developing research practices entail some difficulties that I would specifically like to discuss: the differences between research time and action time; the researcher’s and the subjects’ interests, which sometimes may differ; the different ways to be involved in knowledge production – counselling, guidance, collaborative research – the changing roles we play in the fieldwork – from reliable expert to counsellor and activist – and the different skills and dilemmas these roles require and entail.

I will first introduce some starting points to address this type of research experience. Then I will provide some information about the development of circus arts in Buenos Aires in order to understand the conformation of *Circo Abierto*, the group of artists I worked with in the research. Finally, I will go through the different stages and roles involved in the research I carried out in collaboration with the artists in order to analyse problems, tensions and potentialities. The general purpose here is to share experiences that, I hope, will serve as triggers to rethink research practices and the potentialities regarding working with “the others” in pursuit of recognising the knowledge and practices that were once denied and subordinated, in my case, by hegemonic valuations of the arts, which historically considered circus as a minor art.

Theoretical and methodological starting points

The debate around the potential that our productions can have within the social groups we work with has been characterising anthropology since at least the 1970s, based on some critical reconsideration about its colonial origin. In general, the 1971 Declaration of Barbados⁵ is the unavoidable reference used to criticise the classic approach to anthropological research on indigenous populations, and to rethink it focusing on collaborative and activist models. Nevertheless, various authors point out the ambivalences in the anthropological production that appeared in the following years, particularly the one developed in the US (Hale, 2006; Rappaport, 2007; Segato, 2013). The criticism focuses on the “reflexive anthropology put forward by the post-modern perspective, that is, a temporary immersion into the world of the other to return to ourselves after having experienced an anthropological defamiliarisation process which will let us see ourselves clearer” (Segato, 2013, p. 13). This redefinition of ethnography as a literary genre/written representation of the cultural interpretation rather than as a fieldwork research process (Rappaport, 2007), while it entailed a significant theoretical renovation as “cultural critique”, it moved away from the “mandate of activist research”⁶ that could be found in the initial criticisms of the anthropological justification for colonial dominance (Hale, 2006; Álvarez-Carenzo, 2012).

The Latin American context, however, has its own path regarding reflection on the authority in knowledge building, the unequal legitimisation of knowledge, the division between research and action, “participation”, “commitment” and “collaborative” building process in favour of a critical knowledge production that serves as a means of emancipating subaltern sectors and fighting inequality in our societies (FalsBorda 1987; Scheper-Hughes, 2002; Achilli, 2011). In this sense, it is important to point out that such ideas cannot be perceived as recent innovations, but as products of long-standing intellectual, social and, I would add, artistic traditions (Facer y Enright, 2016).

Since the 1960s, in Latin-America there has been a process of “awareness-raising”, and its strategy was to challenge government policies, elitist institutions and social stratification that had been legitimised by the institutionalisation of knowledge, with the aim of spreading the fight of the masses.

This movement was seen in multiple disciplines, such as pedagogy (Freire), political economy (Marxism), religion (Liberation theology), activism (deeply rooted in basic ecclesial communities made up of urban workers, farm workers, and students), ethnography, journalism, literature and other cultural practices (Yúdice, 2002, p. 342).

In this context, as García Canclini argues, different kinds of artists – writers, filmmakers and singers – became interested in popular culture, not just because it was a set of unaltered traditions that represented the romantic idea of “*el alma del pueblo*” (the spirit of the masses), but as a strategy to expose the situation of the oppressed and fight against it (García Canclini, 1988). This movement left its imprints in Latin America, despite it being brutally mutilated by the different dictatorship regimes beginning in the 1970s.

Within the contemporary context, and again in the field of social sciences and, particularly, anthropology, the so-called ‘decolonial turn’ (Mignolo, 2007; Castro-Gómez y Grosfoguel, 2007) involved different points of discussion that clinged to the critique of modernity from the perspective of colonialism. One of these points, framed by the tensions in the dichotomy of knowledge/power, was based on the knowledge production methods (Eurocentric, western, positivist) that had regarded anthropology as a science.

All of these proposals, with their subtle and varied differences, champion a way of building situated and politically committed knowledge. In the said knowledge-building, collaboration is central to each phase of the research, from the conception of the project to the development of theoretical and methodological strategies and, more importantly, to the writing and dissemination of the results (Hale, 2006; Rapaport, 2007).

As I will elaborate later, my intention is to analyse my research experience in terms of collaboration, exploring the process it underwent in order to become an “anthropology on demand”, as coined – in Spanish – by Rita Segato (2013). From this conception, Segato proposes that the discipline should serve the needs of “our traditional ‘object’ [which] should nowadays question us, tell us who we are and what it expects from us, and demand us that we use our ‘toolbox’ to answer its questions and contribute to its historical project” (Segato, 2013, p. 14).

Based on these theoretical and methodological premises, I proceed to analyse the research process I have been carrying out together with the collective of artists *Circo Abierto* since its foundation in 2011.

Circus Arts in Buenos Aires, Argentina

a. Stories of valuation and resignification

As I have argued in previous works (Infantino, 2014; 2015c; 2016), circus is nowadays a significant cultural activity in the City of Buenos Aires, and despite it having some variations among cities and provinces of the country depending on their size and history, it is also an artistic practice that is undoubtedly going through a revival process and increasingly occupying new spaces on the local cultural scene. Seventeen years ago, however, when I first approached circus artists in Buenos Aires to conduct my research, circus in Argentina was considered a 'minor art', discredited by hegemonic valuation. Circus arts enjoyed great popularity until the first half of the twentieth century, when it started to suffer some hard blows, both locally and internationally. The emergence and development of new cultural industries – particularly television – as well as the modernisation and growth of the cities, and the consequent sedentarisation processes experienced by many leading figures in these arts (Silva, 2011) changed the processes of production and reproduction of circus. Circus was a popular art and a cultural activity that enjoyed the privilege of exclusiveness as it visited even the most remote towns in the country. But from the 1960s onwards, it started to withdraw from the cultural scene, and that entailed a decline in the number of circuses and in the quality of the shows.

Nevertheless, from the 1980s onwards, this art form, which had been despised and marginalised, began experiencing a recovery and resignification. In different works (Infantino, 2014; 2016) I have analysed this process through a periodisation that involved a first period, *the antecedents*, in the post-dictatorial 1980s. After the end of the last military dictatorship (1976-1983), various popular artistic expressions, including circus, began to be recovered by young artists. Thus, the *local genesis of the renovation of circus arts* begins, recovering some of the resignifications that these arts have been experiencing at an international level – centrally from the innovative proposals developed in France or Canada around the so called *New Circus* – but with a local branding. Those renovating experiences that came to the country in times of democratic openings as innovations were combined with practices, which recovered "traditional" artistic languages (the *murga porteña*, the *tango*, the *criollo* circus, among others).

This particular modality of intersecting *the new* and *the old* cannot be understood without thinking about the openness implied by the teaching of these artistic languages outside of the traditional form of reproduction of these arts within the "circus families".⁷ Opening the secrets of the circus and "incorporating new blood" were the wishes that motivated Jorge and Oscar Videla, third-generation circus family artists, to open the Criollo Circus School in 1982. The school was the first space for teaching the arts of the circus in Argentina and pioneering in South America, after the National School of Cuba and the experiences of Brazil. The school was "a boom ... it was like throwing a rock in the water and watching it expand ... and so our dream expanded. People were crying out to learn the techniques of the circus", recalls Oscar Videla.

In those prolific 1980s we thus saw the antecedents of a movement that gained more strength and notoriety in the decade that followed, a period that I called *the resurgence*. Throughout the '90s, the squares and parks of Buenos Aires, and several other central cities of the country, were occupied by artists who defined a particular style: *Street Circus*.⁸ This style was consolidated in parallel to that proposed by artists who backed the internationally influenced style of *New Circus* as well as to the continuity of circus families who went on performing the so called *Traditional Circus*.

I studied how these differential modalities of producing and reproducing these arts implied aesthetic disputes as well as differential ideological conceptions about how to conceptualise the arts and its political-social role. These disputes were accentuated in the third period during the 2000s that I have analysed as *the legitimization*, a context in which circus arts began to circulate with greater presence through legitimated spaces of art, arousing interest both in the market and in the state.

b. Creation of Circo Abierto

The creation of Circo Abierto must be seen as a process set inside the tensions resulting from the legitimisation process mentioned above. Circo Abierto is a group of artists established in June 2011 as a result of a collective action taken to complain about the implementation of an official state policy for the promotion of circus arts managed by the City of Buenos Aires' Ministry of Culture. I have analysed in different papers (Infantino, 2014, 2015a, b) the tensions that were triggered by the involvement of the local state in the promotion of circus arts. The causes of these tensions are multiple, and they are present on several levels I cannot elaborate on here. Suffice it to say that the state's involvement triggered some interesting debates on which artistic style – original/traditional, local/international – would be promoted by the public policy, and what conceptions regarding cultural policy would the state put forth.

Once the 3rd Buenos Aires International Circus Festival at Polo Circo in 2011 was concluded, a significant number of circus artists from the city of Buenos Aires, in disagreement with the management of the state policies, came together in search of a space to discuss ideas, rethink themselves as a group and organise to defend, disseminate and improve the circus arts. This process relocated my commitment to the field and led me to rethink the role of anthropological research and the purpose of knowledge production.

Potentials and dilemmas in the research experience

a. Academic times vs. times of action

Until 2011 when Circo Abierto was formed, I had developed different working strategies together with the artists, trying to question certain dichotomies such as those mentioned at the beginning of this work. As I argued, a passionate curiosity led me to cultivate the desire to know more and more about that circus art of which I felt part, no longer as an artist but as a researcher committed to its promotion. Consequently, during those years I collaborated with the cultural formation of circus through various actions: the creation of joint projects to disseminate and promote the circus arts, lectures, coordination of forums for discussion, among other activities.

These activities, commonly known as extension or counselling, were mainly delimited by my academic requirements: in 2011 I had to finish writing my PhD thesis.⁹ This situation implied great difficulty; it was hard to keep up with deadlines in the academy and participation and commitment in the artistic field. The prolonged time of reflection and theoretical deepening required by the writing of the thesis became incompatible with the "urgencies" of the field. A field that was not distant and from which it was difficult for me to distance myself.

Precisely, this was sharpened from mid-2011 when Circo Abierto was conformed. After years of lack of collective organisation in the local circus art scene, 500 circus artists – mainly from the city of Buenos Aires – signed a petition denouncing the malfunctioning of the public policy program. These developments presented a dilemma to me. On several occasions I had written that a major failure of local circus artistic formation was its lack of collective organisation, as it resulted in little or no participation of groups of artists in the demand for the promotion of artistic practices. When, finally, there was a collective and purposeful reaction from artists to demand participative politics, I, as a researcher committed to the field and its promotion, was in the middle of writing my PhD thesis.

The only valid option to solve this dilemma (personal, ethical-political, intellectual and academic) was to approach Circo Abierto. In the beginning, I joined without a clear goal, other than to communicate my empathy with the claim and to share what I was writing as well as to raise the need to register what was happening from the conformation of the collective. I also offered some of my skills as a researcher; specifically my writing skills and my theoretical knowledge on cultural policies and popular arts. During those months in 2011, my participation was intermittent in a dizzying coming and going, between the final writing of the thesis and the dynamics that was shaping the organisation of Circo Abierto.

The tension between the duration of the action and the duration of academic critical reflection could be the subject of another essay. The tension also involves and intertwines with the epistemological critiques of the dominant position of certain forms of knowledge (objective, rational, positivist, produced by *those who know*, i.e. academics) over others (subjective, based on practice, not systematised /chaotic, produced by *those who do*).¹⁰

In an interesting analysis on academic and extra-academic intellectual practices in the field of arts and social transformation, Mario Roitter highlights the fact that, given that knowledge is constructed and constituted as such within the academic fields, “its generation, circulation and distribution legitimates itself if and only if it is produced by researchers who perform their work within the boundaries of the academy” (Roitter, 2009, p. 5). However, following Daniel Mato (2002), he proposes to think of *intellectual practices* transcending and disputing this hierarchy. In trade unions, in schools, in social movements, in the arts, in the public sector, in hospitals, knowledge is produced. Thus, it is claimed that the knowledge production that takes place in these spaces is an intellectual practice, although it is not always meant as such.¹¹

I cannot develop these various aspects here, although it is worth mentioning that many of the actions that I developed with the artists attempted, not without conflict, to question and transcend these hegemonic representations about who has the knowledge, identifying types of differential knowledge, strengths and weaknesses between artists and academics. I will discuss some of these issues below.

b. From accompaniment/advising to collaborative research

Initially, Circo Abierto worked through face-to-face relationships in the circus arts circles in the city of Buenos Aires. Then a chain of e-mails was distributed through which various artists, students and producers involved the circus arts in the city and in the country were contacted. Later, they created a blog announcing the open meetings to any artist interested in participating. In this blog, the agenda date and time of the meetings were announced and later also a summary of what took place at the meetings.

From these assemblage weekly meetings, the participating artists set out to create actions to obtain the recognition and succeed with the promotion of circus artistic practices in the city and in the country. In this process, one of the first issues that became evident was the great lack of knowledge that the artists themselves had about the circus community in Argentina. Consequently, the need arose to create a National Circus Census. In this case, the artists who formed part of Circo Abierto invited me as a “specialist” and I collaborated with the design of the census, which began to be implemented in November 2011. The artists developed the questionnaire, identifying what they wanted to know, what they wanted to ask, how they wanted to divulge the census, what strategies they would take to get the most artists to answer it. Finally, I reviewed the final version and gave advice in formal terms so that the data could then be processed.

It should be clarified that this advising work involved a great personal challenge and a negotiation with the artists. In my anthropological career I was trained in qualitative methodological techniques – fieldwork, participant observation, interviews. But I had only learned quantitative methods in terms of understanding census data and did not have the practical knowledge of how to create a census. Once again, the duration of the academic work was faced against the urgencies of the field. There was no time to conduct even an accelerated course of census statistical formalities. Therefore, I only evaluated the topics and contents of the questions, and I had to communicate to the artists my inability to work with this type of demand and that we needed to summon a sociologist or someone who knew about census statistics.

The census was finally carried out through a web platform which was only accessible online. Technicians who functioned as advisors contributed to the design process, which took place between November 2011 and November of 2012. The census was answered by 1.950 people. It was aimed at students, artists, teachers, directors and coordinators of schools and circus spaces, and anyone connected to circus activity.¹²

The census was a useful instrument for making public the purposes of Circo Abierto and as a bridge to think and assess future actions. This laid the groundwork for the design of Circo Abierto’s future and the work they have done since then: artistic and pedagogical professionalisation; visibility and heightening of these arts; exchange and consolidation of an artistic community through which they can express their demands on a political/legislative level.

Circo Abierto collectively defined these lines of work, its mission, possible actions to develop and set up work commissions. In this process, I participated with suggestions and/or took on different tasks and roles with the artists. In some years my participation was more intermittent; in others it was more periodic. In some cases, I worked as an advisor; in others, I collaborated on and debated in assemblies; in certain areas, I put my writing skills at the service of artists; in others, I simply learned from

the artists. In this process, I tried to differentiate, not without difficulties, between the objectives of knowledge (that is, what, from my theoretical framework, I wanted to know and analyse) of the purposes and actions that were being agreed among Circo Abierto. In the table below, I summarise these different roles and actions.

Artists and researcher: Definition of objectives	Design of actions	Role of the researcher
Identify the constitution of the national circus community. Characteristics and needs	National Circus Census	Advising / collaborative elaboration of questions Possibilities and limitations
Promote and disseminate circus arts and local artists	Festivals/meetings/ Performances	Registration, accompaniment, learning
Needs and demands: lack of spaces for pedagogical training and debate	Conferences on pedagogical training and reflection	Joint design, definition of objectives, choice of guests, individual exhibition, moderation and / or coordination.
Institutionalisation	Civil association	Accompaniment in the formulation of objectives and purposes
Political Dispute for Recognition	National Circus Law	Collaborative research and writing of articles and foundations

One of the most ambitious purposes of Circo Abierto is at the political/legislative level. With the aim of demanding the recognition of the artistic activity, in 2012 the possibility of formulating and demanding a *National Circus Law* to promote circus arts through the creation of a National Circus Institute arose.¹³

It was in this line that I found and generated with the artists a space to do something that, with time, turned into collaborative research conceived as a shared work in which the objectives and paths to be taken are defined collectively. The research and the collective process of writing of the foundations and articles of the law were carried out between 2012 and 2015. In this process, I worked with three artists within the Legislative Work Commission adding to discussions that involved debates about lines of writing and action. Then, those partial products that made part of the “Foundations of the Law” were presented in assemblies and meetings, exposed to criticism and then reworked accordingly.

One of the most interesting aspects in this process had to do with the challenge that artists and anthropologist faced in terms of incorporating *diversity* into the law. I remember one of the debates about inequality between different territories that was evidenced in one of the first meetings in which the advances of the law were presented:

“We were in the city of Rosario, province of Santa Fe, in the II National Congress of Circus and Social Circus. We had worked on the writing of the law and we presented it with great enthusiasm to artists from different provinces of the country. The feedback was not what we expected. The first thing that was said was: ‘that is written from the point of view of Buenos Aires and here other things happened’. I felt responsible. Much of what we had written to support the need for a law to promote circus came from my research focused on Buenos Aires. On the other hand, nothing was written or registered in the different provinces. I wrote down in my notebook the importance of recording those stories, those local, subaltern narratives that seemed to be in the shadow of the story I had told ... a marginal story that after many years of research I had managed to reconstruct and disseminate” (Reconstruction of field work, 2012).

This conflict was framed by historical tensions that transcend the case of the arts and that have characterised conflictive relationships based on the centralism of Buenos Aires as capital city vs. the provinces ever since the foundation of the Argentine Nation in the 19th century. Thus, the signalling of the replication of Buenos Aires centralism in drafting the foundations of the law led us to design and agree collectively on strategies to achieve more representative data on a national level. New debate meetings were held during 2013 in which different demands and needs were registered in the different regions of the country. Local data of those stories that were not written were requested to artists in each region. But above all, an attempt was made to create a horizontal and open organisation that would involve representatives of the different provinces of the country in the active writing of the law. This “call” to commit and participate did not yield too many positive results. I remember how in one of the Circo Abierto assemblies the following was discussed: “They threw us down for what we had done, because it was not representative, but nobody sat down to write anything else” (Field Record, Circo Abierto Assembly, 2014).

The discussions circled around the difficulty of writing, “because we as circus people are people of action and nobody likes to sit on the computer to write, answer mails and do that work that is tedious” – as expressed by an artist in one of those discussions. Again, here we are also seeing a tension between the duration of political work and social urgencies. In 2015 there were pending elections and a political “change” was already visible, not only in the country but in the region, which would imply an end to the cycle of centre-left governments and a less favourable scenario for demanding participatory policies from the state. The strategy for establishing a law in the shortest amount of time, which was as representative as possible, was to design an open questionnaire which was distributed to each province and answered by a local referent who assumed the responsibility of communicating the demands of each province. The information provided by this questionnaire was used to rework the foundations towards a more federal vision that included the differences and inequalities between central cities/provinces and marginalised cities/provinces. Needs emerged, which represented the entire national circus community but with territorial differences, for example, the need for training spaces for educators or areas in which to improve pedagogies and the need for information to address issues such as security. There are territories, such as Buenos Aires, Santa Fe or Córdoba, that have schools and artists with a history of more than 20 or 30 years, while in some towns there are no spaces where people can work to develop professional circus skills.

Further, the challenge of including diversities was not only related to geography, but also to the diverse forms in which circus arts practices are being developed in the country. In meetings and assemblies it was discussed: “what does the juggler who is working alone in the street have in common with the traditional circus family or artists in charge of a circus school?” (Extract from field diary, 2013). Here, important tensions arose around questions of authority and legitimacy in the reproduction of the artistic field. Who are the “real/authentic” circus artists? Those who have been reproducing a family history of generations of artists, artists who for more than 30 years have been renewing these arts, those who teach in schools, those who manage festivals and meetings in the different provinces of the country, those who use these arts as an instrument of social intervention?

The analysis and discussion of these tensions – which also involve disputes on symbolic recognition and material resources – proved useful in highlighting the different needs/demands that arise in all the ways in which circus arts are developed in the contemporary arena.¹⁴ Likewise, it involved the definition of (political) agreements within Circo Abierto that implied the need to generate broad consensus to incorporate the greater number of social actors in defence of the law.

In a talk with a group of artists from Circo Abierto, the challenge in relation to accommodating “everyone” with the law emerged: “We had a meeting with a musician responsible for the drafting of the National Music Law. And there he gave us advice. It was important that everyone felt represented, to let everyone inside. And that’s why it took us so long to write the Draft Law” (Exchange with Circo Abierto artists, 2015).

Artists and anthropologist all agreed that the strategy was to summon everyone: street artists, those who teach in schools, those who are framed in a more innovative or more traditional style, those who are from traditional circus families and those who are not. I argue that this strategy should be understood as a political strategy that, although it did not dilute differences and disputes, it aimed to transcend them to consolidate the collective struggle. To transcend the different aesthetic, political and ideological ways of conceptualising circus art by appealing to a collective sense of community that incorporates the diversity of styles, histories, origins, trajectories in a common identity construction – all part of a struggle for recognition of every form of development of circus arts in the contemporary arena.

As I have analysed so far, this collaborative research process meant a different way of building knowledge compared to

conventional academic modalities. On the one hand, ethnographic fieldwork was not reduced to the collection of data and a reflective and solitary moment of analysis and writing. Rather, it was intertwined dialectically and collectively. In this process, my own research objectives, methodologies and theoretical frameworks were modified and expanded. And, fundamentally, the lines of action, the construction of categories and the writing process were not defined in individual ways but were debated and constructed collectively.

The foundations of the law were finalised during 2015, and expert advice on technical and legal issues was applied to format the articles in appropriately. By the end of that year and on the eve of the inauguration of a new national government, artists decided to perform an act of presentation before the Congress of the Argentine Nation in order to make visible the circus community and its claim (Figure 1). The law was thus announced in an artistic act that brought together more than 500 artists and referents of the circus field (Figure 2, 3, 4 and 5).



Figure 1: Pamphlet announcing the presentation of the Circus National Law at the gates of the National Congress of Argentina. It reads: “Festival for the Circus Law in the Congress. To promote circus activity through a National Circus Institute. Fill the congress with Circus and let the law be heard”. Author: Circo Abierto.

Figure 2 and 3: Artist in aerial silk at street performance in the Festival for the Circus National Law at the doors of the congress 2015. Photos: Julieta Infantino.





Figure 4: Trapeze artist in performance for the National Circus Law. Photo: Julieta Infantino.

Figure 5: Artists from Circo Abierto performing Triple height in performance for the National Circus Law. Photo: Julieta Infantino.



c. From Collaborative Researcher to Activism

Although the collaborative work and research produced so far implied potentialities, learning and complexities, by the beginning of 2016 a series of events arose, which implied new demands and new roles. In the trajectory reported thus far, I had been “committed” and clearly involved with the possibility of promoting instruments for the recognition and valorisation of circus arts through various actions, including the drafting of the law. However, when there was a need for channels through which to formally introduce the law and establish contact with national deputies and/or senators, artists requested my assistance – this time as a more committed presence, as an insider and an activist.

This calls for revisiting the questions that guided this work: How can we manage and reflect on distancing/commitment when we conduct research in the fields in which we also participate, socially and politically? How do we commit and what do we commit to? How do we conceive of commitment and being part/insider?

In a fundamental work in rethinking these topics, Kim Narayan proposes to critically problematise the notion of “native” anthropology:

Instead of the paradigm emphasizing a dichotomy between outsider/insider or observer/observed, I propose that at this historical moment we might more profitably view each anthropologist in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations. The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux (Narayan, 1993, p. 672/3).

This exemplifies the inconsistency of the dichotomisation between native/non-native in connection with the multiplicity of identity ascriptions that characterise us. This served to rethink, in my case, the way in which both artists and researcher have been manipulating, not without ambiguities and complexities, my insider/outsider status. At times I am challenged and I feel as one of us, as a member of Circo Abierto or as an activist/ideologue of the law. At other times, for example, in front of deputies, advisers or politicians, I am presented as “the CONICET academic anthropologist who wrote a book about us” (Fragment of field diary, June 2016). In other cases, as when discussing specific artistic tasks, I am expressly challenged and reassume my position as an outsider. However, as discussed by Rappaport (2007) in the case of long-term indigenous collaborators, at times I am more “fanatic” than the circus artists themselves, but even so, I never cease to be represented and feel ambiguous as *the other* or as a *different insider*.

Therefore, I suggest that the inside and the outside should be seen more as dynamic, changing and ambiguous tensions. Ultimately, during my 17 years of engagement with the circus field, and specifically, in the collaborative/activist work that I described in this article, I became a *different part of the inside*. This porous border that I went through throughout this process led me to understand that what I was building, together with the artists, was an “inside as a process, as opposed to inside as a condition” (Rappaport, 2007, p. 224), an idea by which Rappaport – based on the arguments of Brubaker and Cooper (2000) – suggests to question the essentialisation of the concept of “identity”.

And in that process, my position was never neutral. It was always characterised by a firm commitment to the promotion of circus arts, in order to fight for better conditions for its reproduction and for the artistic-labour conditions of its protagonists. In this sense, I consider it interesting to continue to rethink what we understand by “commitment”. Because in the end we do not commit ourselves to everything that happens in the world that we are investigating;¹⁵ we are committed to some issues, which, among other things, are constituted by our political-ideological position and by our way of thinking – in this case, arts and the role of social sciences. As I have argued in this article, in my research process, my commitment was focused on developing strategies together with the artists who promoted actions to draw value to the circus arts through a legislative proposal. This positioning placed me in a particular role within the artistic field and, at the same time, led me to attend to new processes of collective protest that transcended and resignified the disputes that had characterised the field I had been studying and which was the focus of my research interests.

Final Thoughts

I began this work by analysing a field account that was meant to trigger a reflection on various tensions that cross the field of research: inside/outside, “we”/“others”; research/ academy/rationality vs. art/passion/feeling, objectivity/subjectivity. The intention throughout this work has been to share how, in the course of research, these tensions arose and what strategies I developed to face them. Through this retrospective analysis I have tried to show how much these worlds that present themselves as antithetical intersect and what dilemmas and potentialities derive from those crossings.

On the one hand, I tried to question the inequality in the valuation of some intellectual practices over others. In fact, in the collaborative process of formulating the draft of the National Circus Law, it was evident that artists have the necessary knowledge – based on their artistic and intellectual practices – to design a law that represents their demands and interests. But often, this type of knowledge is not usually included in the formulation of policies or laws, which concern the development of the practices that they seek to legislate. Thus, making strategic use of the overvaluation of academic knowledge, I analysed how we – the artists and I – engaged in a collaborative work and used this unequal valuation to fight for an inclusive law.

On the other hand, my commitment, in many cases motivated by passion, allowed me to question the radical separation between artistic (passionate) and academic (rational/neutral) practices. As I have already mentioned, in my career, curiosity, desire and passion always moved me to want to know more about the world of the circus artists with whom I worked. And the commitment remains to favour the development of an art that still continues – under conditions of greater legitimacy – in the shadow of other arts, consolidated as a space to continue developing this task. In this sense, throughout my academic practice I pursued to distance myself and reflect on my own implication to achieve some kind of objectivity and/or to turn subjectivity into a space of analysis. However, passion, commitment and non-neutrality implied a theoretical and political position which involved a number of complexities and potentialities.

It could be argued that throughout the process of research I have analysed here I moved between performing anthropology “about”, “for” and “with” the subjects with whom I worked (Slavsky, 2007). The “about” would define classical anthropology as access and description of the cultural universe of the other; the “for” can imply either a position of defence of rights or the accomplishment of works at the request of the subjects with whom we work, putting at the service of them “our anthropological toolbox” (Segato, 2013, p. 16); the “with” would imply collaborative/activist research proposals such as those defined in this paper (Hale, 2006; Rappaport, 2007). To return to the question asked by one of the anthropologists quoted: “Can one work about, with and for simultaneously?” (Slavsky, 2007, p. 235).

In the beginning of my first research work, these instances - about/for/with - developed almost independently. I observed, wrote, researched from my own goals and interests and collaborated with artists on specific projects to achieve better conditions for the development of these arts. However, during the later years, the about/for/with became intertwined in a professional practice that sought to generate knowledge in a collaborative way to influence the formulation of legislation and inclusive and participatory policies.

As I proposed at the beginning of this paper, I tried to share this research and collaboration experience as a trigger for reflecting on the potentialities of working with “others” in order to promote recognition of neglected and subalternised knowledge and practices. When I approached circus art in Argentina, there was a lack of systematic studies and even of intellectuals interested in investigating its specificities. It was an art that had remained in the margins of the hegemonic valuations of art and of the themes valued by academies. That condition led me to pursue the task of recording, analysing, historicising and promoting the valuation of these arts. On this point, I agree with Rita Segato (2013) when she argues that the choice of our themes, research questions and theoretical frameworks are never neutral, but fully political. In this sense, my political position has always been linked to the visibility/value of marginalised practices, to denature stereotypes that consolidate these processes of devaluation and fight for the expansion of rights, even cultural rights that continue to be considered rights of the second degree. And it is in this sense that I feel called by an anthropology which is *questioned*, *demanding* and at the same time *contentious*, *litigating* while “the scene of otherness that we are studying is in the key of contention, and it is inescapable to take a position on it” (Segato, 2013, p. 15).

And in this way, I find myself after 17 years of collaborating as a researcher, *fighting together with the artists* for better conditions for the development of circus arts. My anthropological knowledge, my political position and the artists’ needs have merged into an intellectual practice which is no longer only academic and no longer only mine. But, this will be my last word, still anthropological.

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Endnotes

- 1 One of the points of my research dealt with how the resignification and growth of circus arts in the 1990s were connected to the neoliberal model of the time, which was responsible for the reduction and flexibility of labour conditions and the increase in poverty. In this context, many young people saw the possibility of 'working as an artist' doing street art performances as an alternative lifestyle that questioned the ideals of individualism and consumerism of those days, and, at the same time, guaranteed them that they would make ends meet. For further details, see Infantino 2011, 2014.

- 2 At present, it is called Convention of Circus, Clowns and Street Arts. These meetings have been held since 1996, and currently over 1.000 circus artists from around the country and the world attend the event and camp there for 4-6 days. The significance of these meetings has been analysed in other articles (See Infantino, 2007; 2014), but it is important to mention here that they became an significant space for the production and reproduction of these arts, where experimentation, getting together and sharing knowledge helped to develop the movement to renew the circus.

- 3 In case the reader is not familiar with Malinowski's centrality as the "founding father" of anthropological fieldwork methodology, it should be pointed out that his contributions during the 1920s and 1930s can be considered foundational axes for the consolidation of anthropology as a science.

- 4 Anthropology has established itself as a scientific discipline based on its point of view about the "other", which used to be an exotic, isolated, and geographically and culturally distant other. The "distant" characteristic supposedly guaranteed the detachment needed to ensure "scientific objectivity". However, contemporary anthropology has been questioning what defines its origins by considering the power relationships we find among a diversity of others, which, in many cases, are close and immersed in our own society. Thus, taking different names such as "Anthropology at Home" and "Anthropology of the Contemporary World" (Ghasarian, 2008), the discipline no longer had an exclusive object of study, a "radical other", and anthropologists started studying groups of people and social practices that are part of our globalised contemporary world. Here, as researchers, we face the challenge of understanding this *otherness* which is now embedded in our own society. In this sense, several authors suggest that it is necessary to experience a defamiliarisation process, which denaturalises the things we find familiar to reach a critical approach.

- 5 "In the rousing rhetoric of that era, the declaration denounces state policies and religious projects that do not 'seek a radical break with the existing social situation; namely, the termination of colonial relationships... [and the] breaking down of the class system of human exploitation and ethnic domination'. They note that 'anthropology ... has often rationalized and justified in scientific language the domination of some people by others'" (Hale, 2006, p. 99).

- 6 Hale defines activist research as: "a method through which we affirm political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results" (Hale, 2006: 97).

- 7 Throughout its history, circus has been a deeply "endogamous" art. The skills and techniques of the circus had been passed down from parents to children, and became "secrets" kept inside those large families that made up the circus family business. This phenomenon is related to the transhumant nature of this artistic form and a family-type mode of production. However, due to several reasons that exceed the purpose of this article, from the 1980s onwards in Argentina and the rest of world, people outside "circus families" had the possibility to learn circus arts, thanks to "traditional/family" artists who decided to reveal the secrets. For further details see Infantino, 2014.

- 8 I define street circus as a performance style closely related to the use of circus techniques brought to the space of street performance, started by artists who present themselves as cultural workers, and who base their identification on the possibility of democratising access to art in urban public spaces.
- 9 The doctoral research had been developed with a doctorate scholarship of the CONICET (National Council of Scientific and Technical Investigations), and therefore there was a strictly stipulated term for its completion.
- 10 Anthropology has historically positioned over this theme and, through various schools throughout its history, has for example highlighted the logical basis of seemingly irrational practices or has valued the knowledge of those who were traditionally considered inferior and ignorant.
- 11 We could of course also mention the delegitimisation of knowledge in terms of canonised Western knowledge, as “the” knowledge versus other forms of delegitimised knowledge, which have been questioned since that “decolonial turn”, which I mentioned before, and by other epistemological movements such as subaltern and postcolonial studies or productions of critical feminism.
- 12 The results can be consulted online in the blog of Circo Abierto: www.circoabierto.blogspot.com.ar (consulted on November 20th, 2013).
- 13 In Argentina, during the last years, demand processes have been developed by various artistic groups in order to achieve visibility, space, recognition and/or resources for the development of their practices. Independent artists and cultural workers with different languages have demanded or continue to demand legislative instruments – laws of promotion, creation of public programs, declarations of heritage, etc. – that contemplate the particularities of their artistic practices and the needs to guarantee their production and reproduction. One of the first laws sanctioned in this way has been the National Law of Music, gestated by independent musicians and sanctioned in the year 2012.
- 14 The law proposes to contemplate the great diversity of demands/needs that involves the current development of circus arts in all their styles and spaces of development: street circus, traditional circuses (tent/family), contemporary circus, social circus, companies and independent circus artists, schools, public and private circus teaching spaces, unconventional circus spaces, festivals, meetings, conventions, congresses, circus forums, among others (First draft of the National Circus Law).
- 15 It should be noted that non-neutrality also places the researcher in sealed spaces, which are not accessible. The current cultural formation of circus is not homogeneous. There are tensions, ideological positions, political and artistic differences that cross it. And often, the location of one side or the other within the cultural formation entails access and sealed spaces.