

Social Circus

The Cultural Politics of Embodying “Social Transformation”

Jennifer Beth Spiegel



A pyramid begins to form onstage. A clown emerges from the audience, throwing fake hundred dollar bills, and climbs to the top of the pyramid. A second clown emerges from the audience reciting from the book of Matthew. He joins the first clown on the top of the pyramid. All in the pyramid cry “Capitalism” and the pyramid collapses on itself. The show has begun.

This opening scene—the fruit of a three-week collective creation process—was devised by Montréal’s Cirque Hors Piste for a Youth for Human Rights event in March 2014. Cirque Hors Piste is supported by private and public institutions working in tandem with social service organizations in Montréal’s downtown area. Cirque Hors Piste offers circus training and creates performances with street-involved youth (youths who live or hang out on the streets), those battling addictions, sex workers, and others who are struggling socially or financially, fulfilling its mandate to “offer an alternative and inclusive space for creation to those with marginalized life paths” and to promote “individual, social and collective learning via circus arts” (Cactus Montréal 2016).

In the wake of the post-1968 politics of the avantgarde and the spread of youth counter-cultures, activist and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari developed an “ethico-aesthetic paradigm” (1995). Amidst the popularization of both art therapy and theatre for development, Guattari believed that creative practice could instigate new values and sensibilities that would transform collectives as well as individuals. Among the “ethico-aesthetic” interventions used by Guattari in his own clinical practice was circus. Throughout his work, Guattari insisted that transformation was not only a personal affair, but inherently tied to larger collective, social, and political forces (Guattari 1995, 2008). While, as Jane Plastow (2015) points out, in the 1970s many publicly supported community-based arts practices emerged as part of politically revolutionary movements, by the 21st century, sustainability required that programs be supported by a combination of governmental funding and nongovernmental organizations. The various organizational, pedagogical, and artistic choices affect the ethico-aesthetic valence of such projects, and reveal the process of social transformation embedded in the *Cirque Hors Piste*.

In the later decades of the 20th century, principles of cultural democracy became prominent in discourses of community art (see Goldbard 2006; Graves 2005) in the hope that this approach could redress the social control implicit in colonial and neocolonial programs (Nicholson 2011). In 2006, community arts practitioner Arlene Goldbard, elaborating on cultural democracy, explained how cultural development assists communities to learn from one another and communicate in multiple directions, countering the agendas of elite institutions that dominate the cultural sphere (Goldbard 2006:129). This discourse, combined with the popularization of “social inclusion” mandates, meant that rather than focusing on community arts as a means of “integrating” marginalized peoples into mainstream society, attempts and strategies to allow individuals and communities to creatively participate on their own terms were to be encouraged (Spiegel 2014).

Social circus, namely programs utilizing circus arts as a means of social intervention with diverse populations, from homeless youth to remote indigenous communities, have been adapting and actualizing this discourse.¹ In Quebec, *Cirque du Soleil* is the principal funder and initiator of social circus for the region, and manages the *Cirque du Monde* social circus programs, which usually operate in partnership with local social organizations in over 80 countries worldwide. The principles of “cultural democracy” would suggest that *Cirque du Soleil* no longer sets the agenda for the cultural values diffused. Ironically, however, the new inclusive discourse of social circus has since been increasingly adopted and even promoted from above. Focusing on “social inclusion” can efface broader structural hierarchies, values, and processes of exclusion, while promoting “cultural democracy” can, inadvertently or otherwise, encourage participation in creative processes in a manner that merely pushes authoritarian dynamics to a higher structural level, entraining

1. See Jacinthe Rivard’s analysis of the social circus discourse of the international social circus organization, *Cirque du Monde* (2007).

Figure 1. (facing page) Cirque Hors Piste participants practicing their skills during the Creation Intensive for the May 2015 show, led by instructors Emmanuel Cyr and Justin Dale Furgala Krall. (Photo by Céline Côté, courtesy of Cirque Hors Piste)

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neoliberal subjectivity in the service of self-expression and self-disclosure.² When contextualized as a means of supporting individuals and communities in pursuit of their own goals, such processes of cultural democratization appear as something of a paradox.

In order to analyze the tensions and cultural politics of this creative process of social transformation, I follow the entire collective creative process of three Intensives de Création (Creation Intensives)³ offered by Cirque Hors Piste from 2013 to 2015, from recruitment and the identification of goals by the participants, to the creative process itself, through to performance, and finally to the collective effort to deconstruct the process that comes one week after the production. I draw heavily on participants' reflections and my own participation in the Intensives to analyze the theatrical interactions that took place and the kinds of cultural expression to which they gave rise. To contextualize these interactions and reflect on their potential sociocultural impacts, I take into consideration the social realities of participants including their working and living conditions, the struggles they face, and the artistic and social goals identified by both the participants and the social circus staff guiding them.

What kind of social transformation can social circus be said to enact? And who can be said to be guiding it? The movement from expressing singular challenges and objectives in "private" to the collective creation of shared expression through circus performance both embodies and shares a particular kinesthetic sociality, enacting a mode of creating collectivity anchored in polyphony, according to which multiple voices, bodies, and singular trajectories combine through shared physical acts of performance. It is a movement that navigates the tensions of a process aimed to attain goals and building skills for surviving neoliberal system collapse, and the imperative to forge one's own path, since jobs and socioeconomic support systems as they have historically been conceived are dwindling. The organization, within this context, acts as handmaiden, intermediary, and temporary support, though eventually participants are expected to move on, to create their own projects or pursue their own training elsewhere.

The Recruitment Process

Social Inclusion and the Production of Subjectivity

Cirque Hors Piste partners with Cactus, an organization that provides harm-reduction services to drug users in the downtown area; with En Marge, which provides services to youth under 18 years old needing a safe place; and with Plein Milieu, which provides outreach to drug users aged 18 to 30 in Montréal's Plateau, a neighborhood adjacent to the southern part of downtown. Cirque Hors Piste also works with a center that provides free meals to youth and with organizations that offer support and safe spaces to sex workers. In 2014 Cirque Hors Piste worked with over 600 individuals.⁴ As artist-scholar Susan Schuppli (2013) points out, the question of what community is served is often the wrong question for understanding the sociocultural significance of socially engaged community arts projects. The real question is: what kind of community does a project create?

Cirque Hors Piste recruits participants for its social circus workshops with the help of community outreach workers, each representing one of the partnering social organizations, who

2. For a critique of participatory management models, see Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari's *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (2001). For a discussion of processes of self-disclosure as emblematic of neoliberal subjectivity, see Erik Bordeleau *Foucault anonymat* (2012).

3. The new coordinator refers to these multiweek show preparation workshops as "Créations Collectif" (Collective Creation) although at the time the fieldwork was being conducted they were referred to as "Intensives de Création" (Creation Intensives).

4. In 2014, 319 participants attended workshops, 83 of whom attended more than one of the 12 offered that year; 285 people came to drop-in sessions.

distribute flyers and inform those with whom they may be working, as well as through the word-of-mouth efforts of previous and ongoing participants. A young woman in her early 20s who had been victimized by violence throughout her life explained how she was recruited:

So it's like a domino effect. I was referred here from my friend whom I met at a fire jam with the fire spinners community in Montréal.⁵ And how I got there is because I have an affinity for fire and wanted to meet other people that also spin. And the reason why I started spinning was because spiritually speaking I felt like I needed to find balance within myself and become masterful of my body. You know, to avoid pain, to heal better... You know because if I'm not active and if I don't move, I'll become stagnate. And I'll become rusty. You know like the tin man from *The Wizard of Oz*. There's a lot of pain for me...the way I see circus for me, it's therapeutic.⁶

The target population is mixed, but loosely comprises individuals who have dropped out—or been pushed out—of “mainstream” society, with a high percentage of high school and college dropouts, as well as many who have been in trouble with the law, or have been in and out of mental health wards.

For the Intensives, participants are admitted by interview. Once accepted they are given a small stipend in exchange for working in 7 to 10 sessions over a 3-week period to produce a theatrical circus show using juggling, ground acrobatics, aerial acrobatics, and clowning as well as some acting and improvisation skills. Cirque Hors Piste also provides free open drop-in circus sessions for youth under 30 and free outdoor circus workshops open to all. These offer a point of first contact for many participants, and a low pressure creative play space where participants can come and go as they choose. In all cases, community workers seek to reach target populations through referral and recruiting in areas and service points where vulnerable youth are likely to hang out, but anyone is welcome to attend. During periods in which drop-in workshops are reaching capacity, participants are reminded that social circus aims to provide social support during difficult periods and ask that they self-select accordingly. Interviews for the Intensives, however, go a step further, prioritizing those who appear most in need of support.

The Creation Intensives are highly structured and require participants to be committed to the process and its goals. Once accepted to the program, participants sign a contract and are told to treat the process as a job, with penalties for tardiness and absences. The level of pay is limited both because of budgetary restrictions and so that it is low enough that those who receive social assistance payments do not get their assistance level reduced. In 2014, 29 individuals participated in these Creation Intensives, 10 of whom participated in more than one of the four Creation Intensive productions that occurred that year; 66 percent of the participants were male, 34 percent female.

The vast majority of participants, instructors, and community workers I interviewed said the collective work of the Intensives generated a concentrated learning and transformation experience. The Intensives were preferred over more occasional activities that fail to provide long-term continuity.⁷ As one young man noted: “What touched me most in the intensive process was the intimacy that was created with other participants.” The Creation Intensive model departs from the Cirque du Monde model from which it was born and which remains dominant in the rest of the province of Quebec. In the traditional Cirque du Monde model, weekly

5. Fire spinning refers to a category of street art associated with circus, which includes dancing with fire-staffs, poi, and fire hoops.

6. Almost all the more than two dozen interviews conducted from 2014 to 2015 were in French; translations are provided by the author. Those conducted in English are cited verbatim. No identifiers are provided to guard anonymity. All unattributed quotes are from these interviews.

7. These observations are based on conversations from my over two years of fieldwork.

sessions are voluntary. The weekly drop-in workshops of Cirque Hors Piste continue to follow this free and voluntary model. But Montréal's urban environment and the nomadic nature of the street communities that the voluntary program attracts make attendance at the weekly sessions too irregular to develop a show. By paying participants of the Creation Intensives, Cirque Hors Piste treats community members as respected artists and the whole performance project has a more positive outcome. This model proved to be effective in David Diamond's Theatre for Living, one of Canada's most nationally recognized community theatre organizations.⁸ Both the voluntary approach and the paid Creation Intensives recognize participants as worthy of social investment. The former depends on intrinsic motivation, while the latter entrains a work ethic fitted to the dominant economic system.⁹

The actual intensive process begins with an admissions interview, typically conducted by one of the community workers and one of the intensive's instructors. During the entrance interview, would-be participants are asked to identify their social and artistic goals. The interviews are where those who are most able, willing, and/or desiring of an "individual, social and collective" learning process are identified. The interview also is an opportunity for instructors and community workers to learn about the social and artistic goals of the participants, facilitating a participant-centered process. From the beginning, instructors and community workers attempt to instill in participants an understanding that *social* goals are primary in social circus. As one participant remarked: "If my objective is [to learn] a circus technique, I could find that in regular circus [...] and [in those programs] the human side comes after. Here, we switch this as the human side comes first." Nevertheless, as the coordinator explained: "There are many youth who come to learn circus technique specifically, and less so for the social aspect. There has always been this duality since the beginning."

In addition to these two formal purposes, the acceptance interview also acts as what Michel Foucault calls a "technology of the self" (1988), an initiatory act of self-reflection and a verbalizing of goals and desires. Despite being an important part of understanding participants' goals, profiles, and motivations for participating, the interview and selection process have made some participants uneasy:

So I show up and the woman is sort of talking like as if I wasn't eligible for circus or something which made me feel like I had to be some coke head or something or like I had to have dreadlocks and a bunch of piercings or I wouldn't be eligible, okay.

In fact, the entrance interview is the gateway to a collective process in which participants from various walks of life will work together to create a common show.

Collective Creation, Distributed Agency, and Embodied Critique

While admission interviews begin with the individual, the Creation Intensive process is participant-centered with the goal of fostering group solidarity to create an ensemble. The process shares much with Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (see Boal 1985). The dramaturgy is derived from theatre games chosen and in some cases created or modified by the instructors and community workers to explore a particular social lesson, such as trust, teamwork, creative confidence, etc. For instance, in a "flocking" game, one person separates from the

8. Theatre for Living, formerly called Headlines Theatre, is one of Canada's longest running community theatre organizations built largely on Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed model. Shows are typically created with members of the community affected by the show's theme, and all the performers are typically paid equity rates in line with pay rates of unionized actors in Canada.

9. For a discussion of how funding structures influence the production of subjectivity, see Grant H. Kester's *The One and the Many* (2011).

group and the others, following the impulse of someone in the front of the “flock,” moves toward the separated person in a particular manner, and then carries out an action. For instance, in the Creation Intensive process of May 2014, this exercise gave rise to a group poi¹⁰ number in which a group, all following the same choreography, confronts other characters onstage, offering a “power play” (an aspect of the scene developed from another game in which participants improvise, bouncing off of each others’ movements). The choreographed group moved to face individuals, offering each in turn a unique learning experience. In the rehearsal process for this particular scene, one of the participants was a skilled poi spinner, seeking a career in this discipline, and was entrusted with teaching the others the choreography and helping them to master it.



Figure 2. Instructor Cyril Assanthiany demonstrates an exercise to participants of the May 2014 Cirque Hors Piste Creation Intensive at Père Sablon in Montréal. (Photo by Jennifer B. Spiegel)

While themes and messages are sometimes explicitly social, the system of valuation is embedded more concretely in the creation process itself. Whereas in many socially engaged community arts initiatives, individuals flesh out shows on collectively decided social issues with material drawn from participants’ own experiences, in the Creation Intensives the issues of the community are rarely the initial point of departure, even if the group does indirectly arrive at such an exploration. Social circus dramaturgy begins with the personal and moves toward a collective expression with themes that are fantastical or exotic (*Alice in Wonderland*, pirates, gypsies) at least as often as it explicitly explores social issues. Much like the Theatre of the Oppressed, however, the show is given its own particular social valence by the ways in which participants bring their themes to life. The creation process both builds on and transmutes the embodied rhythms and histories of participants. Participants’ histories are diverse and so are their reasons for joining social circus, as are the themes they want to explore, and even the kind of dramaturgical process they would ideally like to learn and deploy. In keeping with observations of others hosting community theatre projects with a view toward social transformation, how and even whether to explore a theme is a matter of debate, much less whether or not to enact a social critique. As Shen Liang observed in his work with migrants in China, many “preferred enacting the community’s dreams over criticizing the reality” (2014:17–18). Individual participants also sometimes link their own personal desires or trajectories to the stories told by the group. For the most part, it is the physicalities and corporeal relationship experienced rather than the narratives illustrated that become the locus of transformation. The creation process offers a mechanism not only for conceptualizing problems and their causes, but also for expressing, if not sublimating, frustrations. As an instructor mused, the characters emerge from secret (or in some cases, not so secret) desires, impulses, and critiques.

The first Creation Intensive that took place after I began conducting research with Cirque Hors Piste was aimed at producing a show for the Youth for Human Rights event I described above. For this creation, the group explored the prejudices experienced by those living on the

10. A poi is a circus prop consisting of a chord and a ball held and spun in each hand, typically creating various forms with the ball while the artist also dances.

streets. While participants came from diverse milieus, with diverse life experiences, many had been harassed by police for being in the streets, drinking in public, etc. One participant pointed out the irony of her friends getting tickets for drinking in public across the street from the outdoor terrace of a bar. Another explained how his experiences with the police and the experiences of his friends motivated him and others involved in the process to make this a theme in the show.

This show featured a playful, carnivalesque chase scene in which two of the performers were confronted by a cop for drinking in the streets. Through an intricate combination of juggling, partner acrobatics, hula hooping, and a chase through the audience, the pair turned the power dynamic on its head, leaving the police officer flat on her back. Throughout the production, the language of circus became a vehicle for a humorous critique of dominant social structures and policies that affected the participants individually and collectively. The pyramid collapsing in on itself while performers yelled “capitalism” was a literal critique of capitalism’s exploitative pyramid schemes. Soon after, a young man, dressed as “Waldo”—the picture book character famous for being forever lost in the crowd—was featured holding a clipboard, suggesting the bureaucratic list-making of administrators. Waldo eventually in frustration threw down his paper and clipboard.

Many of the performers voiced a desire to awaken audiences to the prejudices against their communities.

This is what happens in our lives. We live prejudices everyday, all the time—in the metro, on the street, anywhere. “You know, you’re a bit weird, so we’re going to exclude you from the system. They want to include us but y’know [...] to get you to become a robot, to get you to follow like a sheep. [...] I think that sometimes, you must put things into perspective so that people see it as if it were them and ask, for example, would I like to feel judged, be stared at, because I am different? They [the audience] understand a bit more how we experience these prejudices. Through the circus show, people are more open to understanding this kind of thing. So we are able to get the message across.

Nevertheless, the desire for inclusion in society does not necessarily mean a desire for integration into the system such as it is, but an ability to impact transformation. As one participant put it:

At the end of the day, what is the degree to which we want to integrate into a system that we oppose? So I ask myself: How can I be happy in this context? How can “marginalized people” be happy in this context? Renounce our values in order to integrate into a system that we don’t identify with? For me, this is an element that is ultra important and underlies my approach in this project.

These critiques exemplify the desire to come together to express collective goals and collective social commentary. The messages, however, are not always explicit. In the next Cirque Hors Piste Creation Intensive, participants built the show on the theme of *Alice in Wonderland* without discussing or conveying any particular social message. It was devised using theatre games, explorations of circus skills already known or quickly attained, and improv pieced together during free exploration periods. It also included a group creative writing exercise on the theme of childhood dreams. The only words spoken were: *Qu’on coupe la tête!* (Off with her head!). The creation process tapped into corporeal fantasies, desires, and the transformation of identities.

Much of the material was generated by a collective stream of consciousness exercise on the theme of childhood dreams. Each participant writes a thought and passes it to the next person. The next person adds to the same page. By the end of the exercise there are multiple collectively created “stories.”

Instructors, doubling as directors, discuss among themselves the theme of identity and the transformation of identities revealed by the material generated in the workshops. While some

scenes created by participants repeated traditional gender roles, others destabilized these. A newly trained aerialist made her debut as a sexy Cheshire cat met by a shy young man trying to woo her. An acrobalance duet ensued. Meanwhile, the Alice wig was passed from one performer to the next regardless of gender, allowing for the impression of a growing and shrinking Alice, a gender-morphing Alice, and a fluid sense of identity. Alice began as a young woman doing a hula-hoop solo, but the wig was soon passed to a young man on stilts, then a comedic juggler. Meaning emerged from corporeal transmutations, pushed beyond the everyday through intensive collective creation and shaped by reanchoring the enactments in shared stories based on the Alice trope, unhinged from any authoritative version.

Whereas the *Youth for Human Rights* show was based on social critique, the *Alice* show drew more heavily on the fantastical. In May 2015, approximately a year after *Alice*, the creation intensive show that was prepared for the *rassemblement*—the annual meeting of social circus programs in Quebec—combined elements of both. After concept discussions, creative explorations, and character development, the collective selected a psych ward populated by a range of creatures as the scene. When asked what message they wanted the show to carry, responses ranged from “unity in diversity” to simply “lâcher notre fou,” or “letting ourselves go crazy.” “We always have a message,” one participant complained, but cited *Alice* as an exception. “Why can’t the message just be ‘having fun’”? Indeed, the implicit expectation that those living in precarious and marginalized social conditions should put on shows about precarity is something that has been heavily critiqued, highlighting the problematic assumption that “at risk” people should perform their vulnerability as spectacle (Santiago 2011).



Figure 3. Participants in concept development for the 2015 show, led by Cirque Hors Piste instructors Emmanuel Cyr and Justin Dale Furgala Krall. (Photo by Céline Côté, courtesy of Cirque Hors Piste)

In fact, the vast majority of circus shows in Montréal do not have a strong social message. But despite not settling on a message, in the process of creating a show for the 2015 rassemblement, a social purpose did surface. The participants were invited to develop characters based on “strange creatures” and/or psych wards. The *Psych* show began with an assortment of strange characters and creatures, some humanlike but some seemingly of another world. Two nurses entered. One, depicted as having a kind disposition, danced through the crowd; the other, stern and aggressive, cried maniacally, “It’s time to take your pills! It’s time for injections!” This set in motion a series of scenes with the entire collective onstage: a pyramid of the entire company; an androgynous figure dancing a diabolo solo.¹¹ When an acrobalance trio of strange creatures performed, the aggressive nurse returned and stuck a needle in the behind of one of the acrobalance flyers, shouting: “Take your injection!” The show crescendoed with a synchronized group dance choreographed from improvisations. In the show’s final moment, the characters scattered and left the stage. Alone and confused, the aggressive nurse revealed that the entire show had been her delusion. She was the crazy one. She was escorted offstage by two instructors in hospital scrubs. Similarly dressed in scrubs, I followed close behind taking notes—a touch that some of the participants found hilarious because it reflexively referenced the dominant activity (taking notes) I had “rehearsed” throughout the intensive.

With its reversal of authority, its denigration of meaning as the ordering principle, and the production of collective desire in the single and collective bodies of the performers-creators, the production was, like the previous two, highly carnivalesque. Participants who had engaged in several creation intensives with the organization agreed that the psych ward show had the smoothest group creation process with the strongest group chemistry they had experienced. Exceptionally, even the instructors, and myself as visiting researcher, were integrated into the *mise-en-scène*. As with the other Creation Intensive processes, exercises were chosen throughout to help participants support each other in developing their characters. For instance, an imitation game in which everyone embodied and explored each character had been selected to aid those who were struggling most in the process. This group solidarity was evidenced in the actual dramaturgy of the production. The show was replete with pyramids carefully negotiated to make sure no one would get hurt in assembling or disassembling them. Unlike *Alice*, which was primarily solos, duos, and trios, *Psych* included all 10 participants onstage the entire time.

Social Transformation

Tension in the Politics of Inclusion

Situating social circus within what Richard Schechner seminally described as the efficacy-entertainment braid (1977), social circus generates cultural modes of relationality and sociality. Specifically, it embodies a “politics of touch” as articulated by cultural theorist Erin Manning in her book dedicated to the concept. Touch—visceral, emotional and intellectual—is the seed of a “democracy-to-come,” forging what Manning calls a “future anterior” (2007:115–16).

So what kind of future anterior is enacted? What does the social circus process do to generate “life lessons,” and how do such life lessons redistribute individual and collective agency within epidemic conditions of precarity? Survey results suggest that social circus programs in Quebec show some success in equipping participants with “life skills” of the sort delineated in the Cirque du Soleil community worker handbook *When Circus Lessons Become Life Lessons* (Lafortune and Bouchard 2010), skills such as teamwork and risk management, fostering personal growth, social inclusion, and social engagement (Spiegel et al. 2014). One instructor noted of the *Alice* production:

11. Diabolo is a juggling prop consisting of an axle and two cups. This object is spun, thrown and caught, using a string attached to two hand sticks.

We were a heteroclite group, everyone was very different. And we're going to work together. And we will see together, who we are as a group. Because, even if we have super different elements amongst us, well then we are a heteroclite group, but we are a group. And it works, there is glue [...] a type of glue made for this type of mix, of cohesion.

Social circus as a source of creative inspiration has a strong connection with urban youth living under precarious conditions. Work is both hard to come by and alienating. Previous research with Montréal's social circus community has suggested that the activity is effective in integrating urban youth into the workforce because of its links with marginality and nomadism (Hurtubise, Roy, and Bellot 2003). As Jacinthe Rivard (2007) noted in her study of *Cirque du Monde*, circus work can be distinguished from alienated labor insofar as it allows for creative "world-ing" as delineated by Hannah Arendt (1958). As one participant put it, the social circus was "more stimulating" than the call center jobs that left her feeling useless, due to an inability to remain motivated. Social circus offered her a sense that she really could stick to a schedule if she had a good reason, laying the groundwork for pursuing work to which she felt better suited. She, like many others, began picking up small contracts teaching circus and performing in community events.

However, in session, preparedness for the workforce is never stressed. While some participants treat the program as a work model, citing CV-building in the face of prolonged underemployment, many participants as well as instructors expressed disdain for the imperative to "go to school" and "get a job" as a measure of the program's worth, particularly at a time where going to school is no guarantor of getting a job. What is stressed is personal and collective learning and a pursuit of one's goals. "World-ing" allows for the creation of one's own system of values and the forging of systems of signs and meanings that orient the individual toward an alternative future, drawing on play, dreams, and collectivity. Sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato has argued that in the new economy creativity and the ability to self-manage and become entrepreneurs, to create one's own work, is becoming an imperative, and even a hallmark of neoliberal subjectivity, even as it also creates the potential for nonhierarchical world-ing (1996). It is into such a workforce that social circus may be seen to be preparing vulnerable individuals for "integration."

In the case of social circus, this world-ing is necessarily corporeal as well as imaginative, grounded in sensorial experience and the development of new relational patterns at the physical as well as emotional and social levels. One participant in the drop-in workshops as well as the *Alice Creation Intensive* noted:

I really have trust issues [...]. A lot of it has to do with my parents. You know my dad, when I was like 10 or 11 years old he came out of the closet. And my mom kind of flipped her shit. And, because my dad was cheating on her with guys and stuff, they broke up, divorced, and then everything just went down the drain. And mentally and emotionally to my parents it was like they just engaged in self-destructive, ongoing, escalating war towards each other [...]—ego, rage, anger, revenge, yada, yada. [...]The people that I loved the most in the world were causing me the most pain through physical violence or emotional violence or through just complete indifference [...]. I'm a very affectionate person [...] so immediately I went to boys. And then I just created this emotional dependency on boys. [...] I was raped you know. [...] I finally caught myself in that negative pattern [...]. So the circus in a way is healing that. You know like when I had that exercise at the last practice, where we're like dancing, and you close your eyes and people are like pushing you around. You know just the action of letting go of all of my muscles because I'm a very tense person, right? [...] So that exercise will allow me to just let go of everything and not hurt myself. Somebody was there to support me. So it felt like that physical action of letting go and having someone else support you was kind of like enforcing an inner change of that spectrum, cool.

Another stated:

I went too deep with drugs. It was too much. I had to calm down. Then shit happened. So I ended up on the street, where I had nothing [*nervous laugh*]. After that, I really decided to go to circus. I was shy, but I ended up saying to myself: I want to do this and let's see what will happen.

Still another:

I suffer from social anxiety, I am afraid of new groups and people. But circus gave me the challenge to integrate within a group. During the year it was always the same people and I was feeling comfortable. It changed my network and I liked it.

The creative aspect of circus was mentioned frequently:

What attracts me to circus is the creative side. It was a side of me I had never touched, blossoming in a group through art; when you can learn at your own rhythm, without being judged.

According to one social worker, this primacy of collective play and nonsexual, nonaggressive touch through the creative act of play, are consistent features throughout all the social circus activities. He explained that the male sex workers with whom he works often are hardened by life on the streets, living in survival mode and with most of their interactions sexually based, whether for work or pleasure. Personal development stories are repeated over and over again, however, the broader social implications are more difficult to assess.

Each of the Cirque Hors Piste Intensives ends with a postmortem that includes reviewing what was achieved, what one liked and did not like about the process, as well as the extent to which goals identified had been reached or approached. In interviews I was able to go deeper with participants to follow up on their reflections.

The process of creating based on games and improvisations was unfamiliar to some with less experience in social circus and who associated serious rehearsals with the more traditional director-led model (rather than facilitator-led collective creation). These individuals tended to associate such games with childish play, thus feeling that they were being infantilized. One participant in *Alice* critiqued the collective creation process at great length:

In reality, I felt like I was a little bit at a daycare center [...]. That's how I feel, honestly. Playing tag. They had a whole bunch of people—20 year olds—up playing tag. [...] That's just ridiculous. That's unconstitutional, unprofessional. It's disorganized completely. I mean, first of all, out of the seven days, it was probably on day three that they were starting to talk about the team and the show and everything. What the fuck are you doing getting a show on the road, hiring people to put up a show and on the third fucking day, you talk about the team? [...] It's really outrageous. I've never seen this on a professional level. That should be discussed on the first day. [...] Not jumping around and acting like monsters and running around playing tag and making all these weird sound effects. [...] I understand that it is part of doing theatre. Unfortunately, with the time we had to put up a show, that wasn't necessary. [...] You know when you're getting paid to do a program and you're going to be dancing samba and we're going to have a show in two weeks. And before we teach you how to dance, we run around and we're going to put wings on and flap like a bird because it'll be fun to flap like a bird. [...] And then on the last week, "Well, you know what? I'm going to start teaching you the steps, not to mention that the show is three days away." I mean, does that sound logical to you?

"Infantilization" was a criticism repeated often by participants interviewed. Indeed, this was the only consistent critique from participants who, throughout my research, repeatedly declared their appreciation for the opportunities that the program afforded them to create and learn in

a supportive environment. Some of these concerns were pedagogically mitigated by instructors who, having heard this feedback, were sure to signal in subsequent Creation Intensives the artistic utility of play and games as being a fundamental part of the creation process. This explanation was given at the outset of the May 2015 intensive, which produced *Psych*, and there were no similar critiques. Nevertheless, some of the concerns revealed a more systemic concern:

I don't like using the term "youth"; youth, who are youth? We are adults. Me, I am 24 years old, I am an adult. I don't think that people who do this [call us youth] have bad intentions, it is just that it isn't right. But really, it's the manner that people are treated, sometimes it is as if you were a child or something like that.

Presumably those who don't appreciate the program are the ones who stop attending. Many come only to a few drop-ins. Interviewees indeed reported that some friends stopped coming due to what was perceived as an over emphasis on "life-lesson" discussions. Nevertheless, some leave in part due to lack of general support for basic survival needs. One participant had left mid-process after several absences; the explanation offered to me by a friend of hers was that she had been struggling with basic survival issues such as where she was going to sleep each night—needs that community workers may have been able to help her address. This highlighted the ongoing tension between the need for assistance with basic survival requirements from community workers often at a time when it may be difficult to ask, which may be essential for keeping participants in the social circus program, and the imperative to respect the autonomy of each participant to resolve their own issues as they wish.

Ironically, despite the critique by someone new to the process that there were too many games in the creation of *Alice*, those participants who had previously participated in Cirque Hors Piste Creation Intensive described *Alice* as being among the best quality shows they had created with the organization, but one with the weakest sense of group cohesion. In this Intensive, the group literally could not work together to create a pyramid. This was in part a question of micropolitical dissensus, combined with acquiescence by some to the will of others—the cultural "democratic" process gone awry in favor of rule by the loudest voices who claim, often erroneously, to speak for the majority.

These micropolitical dynamics are typically the surface effects of broader societal tensions that traverse macro-micro divides. As Jacques Rancière points out, they provide sites for renegotiating conditions of inclusion and exclusion ([2004] 2006). In *Alice* this was due to a confluence of factors. Participants organized extra rehearsals and planning sessions among themselves. Those with other commitments or who had trouble integrating into the group for a variety of reasons ranging from personality conflicts to mental health challenges were left out of these self-organized meetings. Moreover, as is generally the trend in Creation Intensives, those in the most dire circumstances of homelessness or drug use left the process early. What happened was that the same pressures of exclusion that persist more broadly threatened accessibility and group cohesion on the micro level. Mitigating this vicious repetition was the short timespan of the Intensive process, the remuneration, and the emotional support offered by social and community organizations. However, these are far from panaceas.

One critique of collective participatory processes is their tendency toward generating consensus, which, while it is to a certain extent necessary for moving forward, can at the same time efface dissent. The refusal to force a singular interpretation within the group opens a procedural space for dissensus; it leaves open multiple meanings and even the possibility of approaching the practice as a non-signifying endeavor, wherein physical prowess and abstract creative expression are valued for their own sake. The methodology tends toward embracing a multiplicity of expressions reminiscent of contemporary movements toward communities working together based on discrete mutually constituting singularities of what Hardt and Negri name "multitudes" (Hardt and Negri 2004), rather than the homogenizing group identity of "the community." The turn toward articulating singularized lessons, however, as previously

mentioned, was also often resisted by participants who were not comfortable with having to articulate any lessons at all.

If we return to the dialectical question of what community is served and what community is created, and consider this within the broader sociocultural context within which the program takes place, the keys to understanding the apparent contradiction come into focus. Sometimes the debriefings occur collectively, sometimes individually. As such, social circus inverts the methodology of Theatre of the Oppressed that is aimed primarily at community and societal transformation drawing on personal reflection and relationship-building as tools for collective goals. While in Cirque Hors Piste's social circus intensives, connections between the creative process and embodied values or messages of the shows are often visible, they are not necessarily unpacked with participants with the same precision as individual goals; social critique and group work are approached primarily as tools for personal development, even if they seed future collective initiatives. Despite occasional efforts by instructors and community workers to draw links between the themes of the shows and current local social issues, the deconstruction of what participants ultimately created together is left incomplete, and attempts to inquire more deeply are even met occasionally with resistance. What does it mean for there to be multiple Alices? What does it mean for the story to have all been in the head of the nurse? And what, if any, connection does the story have to the personal and social goals participants identified, and the very processes in which they are entangled? Unlike many community-oriented shows, connections between the Cirque Hors Piste shows and the social values they embody are rarely discussed with audiences, and only in the softest of terms with participants, typically during the process itself rather than during the postmortem. During the postmortem, the collective lessons are repersonalized, validating the paths of participants as individuals as they leave the group at the end of the Creation Intensive.

The prompt to identify and later report on such personal goals is one that sits uneasily with many participants. While the self-identification of goals is designed to offer agency to the participants in shaping their experience, such participatory schemas have been criticized as seeking to foster an even deeper assimilation, where the perceived "wrong" answer could keep one from gaining access to the creation process, regardless of the intentions of the admission interviewers to remain open. The perceived message is that one needs to demonstrate a desire to transform to be included. The relationship between participants' personal and interpersonal goals and the broader social politics, or the politics of touch embodied by collective creation, make palpable the potentiality—and tensions—of the process for transformation, which seeks to work across micro- and macro-levels.

What some participants appear to be resisting is the tendency for what Eve Tuck (2010) has named the "damage-centered" theory of change—attempts to reform based on the assumption that the target group is somehow damaged and that identifying the cause of this damage is the first step toward changing it. This thinking is dominant among contemporary "progressives," whether researchers, support organizations, or activists. It also creeps in to haunt participants, whether or not this approach is actually deployed by those involved in the organization. Indeed, many of the instructors and community workers, in many cases former participants themselves, are critical of damage-based notions of change, categorically rejecting the supposition that participants are "damaged." The "damage-centered" theory of change holds that if one names a problem, and shows that a community has been damaged by this problem, this will help to mobilize the resources and support to transform the situation. On the personal level, this could be extended to the rehearsal of shortcomings to be addressed, discussed, and worked through within a collective process where, at the end, one assesses the extent to which one has achieved one's goals and addressed one's problems. If there are tensions in the politics of inclusion, much of this tension lies in the identification of the challenges and goals themselves. The very ways in which the singular and the collective are situated within a larger social context positions youth and marginality as conditions for participation, and predetermines the kind of communities that may emerge as well as the possible intended outcomes.

Social Engagement and the Future of Collective Desire

What Does Social Circus Do?

“You know, I always wanted to be a clown” one participant told me. “I always wanted to do circus arts. What I wanted to do with my life was to do circus and travel in a caravan, sell costumes, etc. Cirque Hors Piste allowed me to get started with this dream.”

Desires, however, are not only transformative; the desires themselves have a way of becoming more vivid, evolving through actual engagement with a group process, particularly when one is asked to articulate one’s goals, work closely with others, tap into creative expression, and embody the fruits of this in front of friends, family, and a viewing public. Many participants I encountered who began as shy and hesitant to perform left the process with dreams of spending a life touring with a circus. While a few sought careers in the performing arts, many specified that their newfound desire was not a drive to professionalize, though supporting oneself would be nice, but rather of simply being able to live a creative life and share that with others. The question of how to sustain a life of this nature, however, was deferred, although many of the instructors had followed this precise path. The transformation of desires perhaps exemplifies the impact of emphasizing process over product—the final product being the transformation in collective subjectivity itself. Shows may critique a social system—or not—but what is learned, finally, is a way of relating, creating, and adapting to structures of production itself. Here the act of expression is what matters rather than that which is said—how it is put together rather than what is put together. Yet, just as who is recruited and how that is done influences the kind of community created, what is said and how it is said is part of the production of collective futures: what can be said, by whom, who is listening, and, most of all, what does this assemblage do?

Youth culture is increasingly characterized by pressure for individuals and collectives to self-represent, to perform their individuality, to perform their public image (Fleetwood 2005). With social circus, however, it is the act of performing rather than of being seen that is placed center-stage, even as the pressure and promise of being eventually seen by an audience propels the process.

I just kept affirming myself and saying like, “I can do this.” [...] We were all encouraging ourselves as a group and bringing up the energy [...] I really felt like I was part of the team and my teammates really appreciated my presence and were really happy that I was there and that really made me feel important.

What is the purpose of this self-representation and the production of collective subjectivity that goes with it? As many have pointed out, social arts programs such as Cirque Hors Piste are often branded as a combination of charity and the fulfillment of civic responsibility on the part of funders, offering tools for self-realization to those “at-risk,” while participants themselves are rarely privy to the discourses and grant applications that shape the programs (Fleetwood 2005). While the fear of infantilization is evidence of the doubts surrounding what emerges from these structures, the process continues to attract participants. Although, for some, this is due to a desire to learn circus skills and earn a little cash, the particular form of sociality is intrinsic to the continued and even repeated involvement of many.

A sociality is anchored to the social circus movement practices themselves, as it is with breakdance and hip hop (see Martin 2012). Some of these dynamics of sociality have already been described: the requirement of collective trust, the engagement in and management of risk-based practices (trading the risks involved in excessive consumption prior to rehearsal for the risk management of being there to support one’s partner who may be standing on one’s shoulders, juggling). Social circus did not invent circus culture for Montréal urban youth, but is part of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would call a “capture device” (1987), harnessing the power of circus for fundable social goals. Many participants were already hula hooping

or juggling on their own before they found the program, but have since gained a community of collaborators and a support system, whether skill for building or for finding further social and artistic services.

As Randy Martin points out about breakdance and hip hop, the unique physicality embodying a sociality becomes the quasi-utopian promise of collectively generated sociality that complicates the spectator-performer divide, generating times and spaces “in which collectivity itself would gain and circulate its own currency” (2012:76). While some in social circus go on to professionalize, and a small number are able to maintain fulltime careers as performers (or more frequently performer/instructors), the vast majority perform for one another—the value being the generation of a mode of interaction for the individuals involved. If, as Nicole Fleetwood suggests, “Youth’s function within dominant visual culture is as fetishized spectacle” (2005:92), the call to express oneself is a condition not only of self-image but of being recognized and thus rewarded as having a place in society. Within this context, the blurring of the spectator-performer divide characteristic of the social arts embodies an ambivalent social politic.

If a key element of the social circus model rests on fortifying social and cultural agency via the ability to express individual and collective goals and identities through engagement with circus arts, to what kind of future modes of relationality has this led? The goal is to arrive at a situation where the supports of social circus are no longer needed. For some it is months, for others years, for some never. Some begin college and return to visit social circus; others create circus shows and return later as instructors; still others move on to other things completely, for better or worse. In 2001 a group of former social circus participants launched a now fully fledged NGO called Carmagnole, best known for their multiday annual community circus carnival, attended and animated by both community and professional artists volunteering their time. Carmagnole also produces cabarets throughout the year and has instigated several small circus companies, the most enduring being *Les Erotisseries* (Spiegel 2016). These circus communities create their own emergent microsocieties in dialogue with and transforming broader societies.

The Ethico-Aesthetics of Social Circus and the Embodied Potential and Tensions in an Institutionalized “Theory of Change”

Personal and interpersonal transformations, particularly at the level of sensibilities and modes of relating, Guattari argues, could lead to broader social transformation; and conversely, social and political transformations could shape subjectivity at both the individual and collective level (1995). It is important to recognize that process-based theories of change do not require attaining utopian equality as a condition of success. Transformation is a process, not a destination. What is embodied in social circus is a challenge to habitual modes of relating, one that breaks with habits of thought and interaction, to open up new individual and collective horizons for future social and cultural development. And indeed I found that there was a strong desire to do so. As one participant stated: “I want to be an artist and to use my strengths to improve society.”

The theory of change described in this article begins with individuals coming together to create something greater. Still, what I found was that the realization and articulation of the larger desired social transformation remains undeveloped among the participants of *Cirque Hors Piste*. There have been numerous critics of what many have called the “NGO industrial complex” (INCITE! 2007; Barry-Shaw and Jay 2012) where the need for an NGO to sustain a program’s funding undercuts its ability to bring about long-standing and far-reaching social transformation (Barry-Shaw and Jay 2012; Plastow 2015). Indeed, the extent of change that can be meaningfully seeded and brought to fruition without a complete transformation of the hierarchies that continue to characterize systems of support (and society as a whole) remains in question.

Community workers try their best to encourage civic engagement and reflection on current issues relevant to themes identified by participants. But the explorations scratch only the surface of concerns, remaining aesthetically sanitized. For the extra step toward not only collective “expression” but also collective social transformation, the process itself may require not only the shared unpacking of collective expression and its relation to personal goals, but also shared development of pathways forward. If social circus acts as a bridge, what remains to be seen is what can be done with the connections built through the language of circus. What kind of new relations are yet to come among community artists, community spectators, community workers, and instructors as guides to the arts of corporeal creation? What would happen to structures of support and processes that guide transformation if the fluidity between these roles, as placed center stage in theatrical form, are acted upon? What would happen if “circus lessons” become “life lessons” not only for community creators but also for those within the broader community who ignore, support, or see youth perform?

If social circus is indeed an ethico-aesthetic practice, that is to say a practice that embeds and diffuses a way of seeing and relating through the rituals of embodiment that it invites participants to rehearse, we can now say several things about these practices: (1) by including those who are generally left outside of formal cultural production, they not only transform audience-spectator relations, inviting active creative participation, but they also bring certain bodies, voices, and street arts to the stage that would not otherwise be there, as well as audiences that would not normally be present; (2) these “new” bodies and voices are being invited in as part of a broader drive toward self-expression and self-revelation that itself is as much a form of cultivating social subjectivity in a culture that promotes self-realization and self-revelation as a condition for active social and economic participation; but also (3) the actual collective modes of relating and especially the desires that are emerging have yet to be fully unpacked in order to draw out and develop social and collective visions for the future. This latter observation is less a critique of the practices or intentions of particular people involved as it is a reflection of the limitations of current aesthetic, social, and structural technologies deployed.

The threat of repeating existing hierarchies in an attempt to ensure a smooth learning experience for the majority of participants remains ever present. Moreover, the controlled and partial nature of expressing the desires for social change while emphasizing the personal suggests a socially ambivalent “capture device” for mitigating the risky elements of youth culture and discontent. Nevertheless, as a site of socially inclusive artistic creation and cultural production, social circus has engendered community-engaged circus collectives as well as the seeding of practices of trust and play. The emphasis on the polyphonic expression of participants as such becomes a pivotal element in shaping the dramaturgy as well as the ethico-aesthetic and cultural dynamic that emerges. This manifests as the embodiment of a social kinesthetic that, at its best, models a technique and community structure for breaking with habits of alienation and instead seeding futures that the joy of collective creation may initiate. As a horizon of futurity, the collective dreams embodied by social circus remind us, if nothing else, that we still have little idea what we are collectively capable of accomplishing together.

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