

A support scheme
for emerging creators of contemporary circus in Europe



“Questionning artists’ mobility in Europe”

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Elena Lydia Kreusch is a PhD candidate in the field of theatre studies at the University of Vienna and - together with Darragh McLoughlin - co-director of the Irish contemporary circus company Squarehead Productions, CircusNext Laureat in 2013/14.

Her research project looks at the mobile lifestyle of contemporary circus artists and how it is intertwined with their artistic practice. In the frame of her field research she goes on tour with different circus companies. She does participant observations and narrative interviews.

The following presentation is based on interviews with 6 contemporary circus artists.



Circus mobilities: “What are potential challenges that mobile circus artists face?”

In the circus context, the act of traveling blurs the lines between personal and professional life, private and public space. Both spheres seem to be intertwined and inscribed into one another.

This means that artistic decisions more often than we'd like to admit are influenced by production constraints, and can have direct effects on lifestyle and modes of travelling.

And similarly, it seems that almost every aspect of the circus artist's life, from our trajectories to our entourage, is completely determined by our creative projects.

One of the artists I interviewed told me: “My current artistic creation is developed over several countries, implicating collaborators of different disciplines and nationalities. I have to be (geographically) flexible in order to get funding or to do residencies, find dramaturges to work with, and so on. It all involves a lot of travelling and at the end of the day I don't have that many choices...”

An other one said: “Right now, I'm building a project in several different countries, so my whole living situation is based on this: Where I go, what place I'm staying in, it's all dependent on this project. Because I'm always moving and always changing places, countries and scenes, I tend to shape my routine around what place I'm in and what project I'm doing.”

« Transitional spaces »

The contemporary mobility logic follows the demand of festivals and performance venues, rather than a geographical logic: Efficient and cheap means of transportation such as the plane allow the artists to perform on two consecutive days in two geographically distant locations. In this case the artist is practically “teleported” from one venue to the next without ever really having the possibility to contextualise it spatially or culturally. Taking this idea to an extreme, it could be argued that contemporary circus artists experience a constant shuttling between airports, train stations, hotel rooms, training facilities, creation centres and performing venues, to name but a few.

One might therefore consider that artists spend a large amount of time in transitional spaces that are not invested with meaning. And that this spacial infrastructure that forms the artist's daily reality isolates them from the societies they are moving through. This necessarily finds its reflection in the artists' subjective experience of their environments and their interaction with, and relationship to, space.

One of the artists I interviewed told me: “No matter where I go, I can never really invite anyone to ‘my place’, I'm always a guest in temporary places that I don't have an emotional attachment to.”

Sedentary roots

In this context it is interesting to note, that a lot of contemporary artists display surprisingly binary understandings of spatial realities. They seem to make a clear distinction between 'being on tour' and 'being at home'.

Contemporary circus artists today are by a large majority, graduates of a higher circus education and often have a middle class background. It can be assumed therefore that until the age of 18 most of the artists grew up in rather sedentary conditions. Being a product of sedentary society, they learned to think of concepts of 'home' and 'family' in a certain way and they have developed certain values towards how personal relationships should be led.

While studying at a circus school abroad for many is their first extended mobility experiences, the majority of graduates don't seem entirely prepared for the challenges that come with the mobility lifestyle of the profession.

To summarize we could say that many artists experience a tension that arises between their own sedentary socialisation their every day mobile living realities.

Many artists I talked to try to negotiate this tension by keeping an apartment somewhere, that functions as point of departure and return. However this raises new logistical challenges, such as: How to justify and afford paying rent for an apartment that is inhabited only around 20% of the year? Who will take care of the flat during the long periods of absence? Or: How to learn to feel home on the move?

One of the artists I interviewed told me: "We toured with our first show for four seasons [...] more than 200 shows. At one point I just couldn't do it anymore – physically and mentally. Because we were all the time away from home."

Relationships

But fusing the spheres of 'being at home' and 'being on tour' becomes a whole lot more complicated when children are involved. Neither funding schemes nor hosting venues seem to really take this challenge into consideration in the contemporary mobile logic.

One of the artists I interviewed told me: "My biggest challenge today is to succeed my family life despite my mobile life style. To balance family life and professional life. I'm not going to lie: it's complicated. "

Similar challenges seem to apply in the field of personal relationships in general. An other artist told me: "When on tour you get to meet a lot of other people, but at a certain moment you just get cynical because you have to leave straight away and if you get too attached it doesn't work, and you never know if you will see them again."

An other artist confirmed this experience: "This is tricky, because I feel like I'm constantly saying hello and good bye to different groups of people. I'm always moving and this can be really nice, especially in the moments you want to get away. But sometimes you want to stay and leaving can be difficult. Building solid relationships of all forms can be tricky, because there is very little solidity in my life at the moment."

While this can be harder on solo artists than on artists travelling in an ensemble or with a company, it seems that for all artists alike keeping up personal relationships outside the touring circles is a challenge.

One of the artists I talked to told me:

"I feel like our lives are so disconnected, that it is hard for me to find common ground with people that don't live our life style. When I'm on tour I often completely lose sense of time and space because our life rhythm is so different and because we have so little contact with the outside world."

Contextualizing Circus mobility

When thinking about circus mobility, it is important to underline its embeddedness in a broader context of globalisation, EU-transnationalisation and labour market liberalisation, as complex mobility realities and work-life arrangements shape the everyday lives of an ever-growing number of people worldwide.

This reality seems to be in direct opposition to romanticised ideas of mobility, of alternative lifestyles and to the freedom metaphors that are used by artists and audiences alike to refer to circus practice. This ambivalence between romantization and market forces was nicely summarized in one of the interviews :

"I am free to go to the places I have to go, which isn't actually that free. When people who are working normal jobs look at my life style they think this is the ultimate freedom, but actually I don't make so many choices"

While having regular costs such as rent, health and liability insurance, circus artists tend to face a high degree of financial precarity. Being dependent on irregular income increases the pressure to tour frequently.

In order to be able to perform the same show over several years, circus artists need to continuously expand their touring networks and renew their audiences. In this regard the European Union provides one of the most favourable spaces for mobile artists; its varied urban landscapes and its density of cultural centres allow for a very efficient touring environment - given a European passport or working permit.

Therefore, when thinking about contemporary circus mobility, it is important to keep in mind how privileged we are.

As Homi Bhabha put it in 1992: "The globe shrinks for those who own it; for the displaced or the dispossessed, the migrant or refugee, no distance is more awesome than the few feet across borders or frontiers."

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CircusNext

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