



# **Deconstructing the Spectacle: Aerial Performance as Critical Practice**

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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31st December 2018

# Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to give heartfelt thanks to my supervisors Frances Babbage and Terry O'Connor for their excellent guidance, creative input and generosity throughout this project. Also, to the University of Sheffield and WRoCAH, for giving me the opportunity to undertake this research and to realize its full potential. Throughout my doctoral research Caryn Douglas and Claire Meadley from the WRoCAH office have offered me an abundance of advice, support and entertaining phone conversations. Many thanks to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and to the Harry Ransom Centre in Austin TX, who supported me in undertaking an IPS Fellowship.

I am extremely grateful to Roberta Mock for inspiring this project and for her mentorship and encouragement. Naomi Smyth has contributed her excellent skills as videographer and creative collaborator to both of the film projects featured in this research. Huge thanks to Ursula Martinez for her superb direction of *Contra* and for making me laugh a lot. Much appreciation goes to Theatre Delicatessen for supporting and hosting my first practice-led project *My Brain is a Radio*. Mish Weaver's artistic insight, much needed frank opinions and passion for making socially engaged work, has been a great source of motivation to my own work. I would very much like to thank Adrian Berry, Kate Hartoch, Verena Cornwall and CircusNext for their professional support and for helping me take the next step in releasing my research out into the wider world. I am also greatly appreciative to The Island Bristol team for their ongoing backing and support.

I have been exceptionally lucky to have three amazing women as part of my core team, whose love, support and intellect has been a guiding light throughout the rough and the smooth. My mother Nicola Murphy, to whom I give tremendous thanks for her unwavering belief in me and my work from the very beginning. My wonderful partner, Madeleine McGowan, who is also my rope idol and a great source of

artistic and intellectual inspiration, and who celebrates every success with me no matter how small.

Nicole A'Court Stuart, my best friend, creative comrade and academic mentor, has supported my work in becoming the best that it can be.

I am so thankful for my most excellent friends Abigail Sweet, Ruzhin Babaei, Nicola Wren, Kate Kieran, Rosa Bellamy, Simon Tucker, Molly Samson, Cai Mason, Jesse Taylor, Siobhan Mckeown, Lexi Pryer, Mike McCallum, Laura Walton, Louise Trenchard, Kieran Gibb, Katherine Lyons and Joe Whitbread, to whom I owe many cups of tea, trips to the pub and messages of encouragement.

Last, but absolutely not least, many thanks to all of my aerialist and circus friends who have helped with choreography, critical thinking, and who have been the best kind of motivational family. In particular, Grania Pickard, Lyn Routledge, Linn Broden, Hamish Tjoeng, Helen Parke, Naomi Pickles, Imogen Macrae, Jude Whitburn, John Hosken, Laura Cork, Rada Manussen, Claire Crook, Micky Bimble, Bob Woods, Sian Mace, Donna MacLean and everyone at the Island circus training space.

## **Abstract**

This doctoral thesis has aspired to find new critical contexts, frameworks and methodologies for creating, presenting and performing aerial work. This project has both enabled and required me to combine my two previously mutually exclusive practices as a live artist and as an aerial rope artist, and to examine the conflicts, contrasts and similarities of these practices. Aerial work as a historically spectacular performance form comes with a plethora of expectations and associations, such as virtuosity, risk, spectacle, freedom and weightlessness, that have been passed on through traditional and contemporary circus genres. These associations have, I argue, thus far limited the potential of aerial practice in terms of the contribution it has been able to make as critical and/or socially engaged performance. As I also argue, aerial work has long been used as a vehicle for social and political propaganda, most recently in its alignment with spectacularized, neoliberal representations of lived experience, emulating and implicitly endorsing notions of freedom, perfection and high achievement. This thesis and research project overall aims to challenge normative ideas attached to and embedded in aerial work, and importantly to present innovative methods for employing and utilizing it in wider performance practice. My research has throughout drawn on methodologies from established creative-critical disciplines, chiefly live art and contemporary performance, which have supported both my practical and theoretical investigations. Such approaches have been useful in considering how aerial work can be used as a means to interrogate politically charged subject matter, issues and debates, by subverting, deviating from, and engaging with its historical associations of 'showmanship' and virtuosity.

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# Introduction

## Aerial Work as Critical Practice

This doctoral thesis has aspired to find new critical contexts, frameworks and methodologies for creating, presenting and performing aerial work. This project has both enabled and required me to combine my two previously mutually exclusive practices as a live artist and as an aerial rope artist, and to examine the conflicts, contrasts and similarities of these practices. In addition, my research has drawn on my skills as a musician, sound artist and filmmaker. All these have been key in finding new contexts and connections for aerial work in relation to sound, rhythm and spectatorship. My practice as a performance maker - in all contexts and disciplines - stems from my experiences as an activist and a desire to critique or respond to current political and social debates. I have previously engaged in forms of activism and direct action, such as occupying rooftops and blockading the fronts of buildings. These efforts have primarily been part of an attempt to publicly critique, or disrupt, corporate investment in the colonization and military occupation of land, ecological destruction, and the manufacturing and sale of armaments, defence equipment and machinery. Alongside such forms of direct action, I have attended public demonstrations and occupations in various cities including Copenhagen during the United Nations Climate Change Conference/COP15 (2009) and London during DSEI 2007<sup>1</sup>. As I later discovered, performance and other creative endeavors can offer a different form of activism, or what I refer to as “in-direct action”, which works towards the same goals as direct action, but via a longer, more circuitous pathway. Hence, such performance work does not necessarily always approach issues head on (as is the case with many direct action strategies), but rather works to engage audiences and challenge issues through a variety of different means and methods. As I argue in Chapter 1, aerial work as a historically spectacular performance form comes with a

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<sup>1</sup> DSEi is an international armaments, defence and security fair held biannually in London, UK

plethora of expectations and associations, such as virtuosity, risk, spectacle, freedom and weightlessness, that have been passed on through traditional and contemporary circus genres. These associations have, I argue, thus far limited the potential of aerial practice in terms of the contribution it has been able to make as critical and/or socially engaged performance. As I also argue, aerial work has long been used as a vehicle for social and political propaganda, most recently in its alignment with spectacularized, neoliberal representations of lived experience, emulating and implicitly endorsing notions of freedom, perfection and high achievement. This thesis and research project overall aims to challenge normative ideas attached to and embedded in aerial work, and importantly to present innovative methods for employing and utilizing it in wider performance practice. My research has throughout drawn on methodologies from established creative-critical disciplines, chiefly live art and contemporary performance, which have supported both my practical and theoretical investigations. Live art, as a genre that fosters subversive, political and interdisciplinary performance, offers a useful framework for considering issues surrounding immediacy, liveness, and audience engagement. The Live Art Development Agency position live art as a strategy for ‘disrupting borders, breaking rules, defying traditions, resisting definitions, asking awkward questions and activating audiences’ (Live Art Development Agency, 2018). Hence, such approaches have been useful in considering how aerial work can be used as a means to interrogate politically charged subject matter, issues and debates, by subverting, deviating from, and engaging with its historical associations of ‘showmanship’ and virtuosity.

Key themes that are central to this thesis are: the three-way relationship between aerial rope choreography, text and concept; the relationship between aerial work and live art; verticality; critical and/or socially engaged performance; the subversion of showmanship and virtuosity; neoliberal representations of lived experience; the critical employment of illusion; the body as communicative device; and spectacle and the deconstructive or interrupted spectacle. My research has been informed

throughout by both Guy Debord's analysis and critique of spectacle and Baz Kershaw's proposal for 'spectacles of deconstruction' (Debord, 1983; Kershaw, 2003, 595). Debord's and Kershaw's models have provided the basis for my interrogation of the use of spectacle within aerial work, in wider society and in critical performance-making. Additionally, I have explored vertical, horizontal and in-between spaces, in and out of the aerial zone. In doing this, I have investigated and sought to expand opportunities for aerial work, whilst recognizing both its limitations and the implications of performance context. My interest in occupying the in-between space is explored in particular in Chapter 4, where I draw on Ronald Bogue's analysis of Gilles Deleuze's 'transverse pathways' to suggest the possibility of negotiated spatial occupation beyond the either/or of the horizontal (ground) plane and vertical (rope) (Bogue, 2007, 3). The thesis acknowledges existing and valuable research on circus and aerial work from other academic researchers in the field, notably Peta Tait, John-Paul Zaccarini, Helen Stoddart and Bauke Lievens. Such contributions have informed and contextualised my own arguments, whilst also drawing attention to areas in the field where aerial work, and its capacity as a critical performance form, has hitherto been under-researched.

In Chapters 1-3 I have addressed key thematic and aesthetic preoccupations of my research through a theoretically framed analysis of relevant practice by other artists who work in or across the genres of circus, live art, contemporary performance and theatre. In addition to these, and as featured in Chapters 4 and 5 and in the Conclusion, I have undertaken three discrete practice-based research projects, all of which actively engage with current social or political issues: first, mental health and anxiety disorder; second, social occupations of the female body; and third, spectacle and 'showmanship' in British politics. All three projects have been conducted using aerial rope and have also resulted in 'finished' performance works, which exist as film and/or live performance and which are positioned in both my research and my professional artistic practice. My choice solely to use aerial rope in these three projects acknowledges

that, with this as my primary aerial discipline, it offered the widest movement vocabulary and clearest scope for my research. I have employed different choreographic strategies on aerial rope across the three projects, principally in relation to: repetition; actively engaging with the use of spectacle; attempting to strip back or employ pedestrian-style movement; and conscious inclusion of awkwardness. While their thematic content differs significantly, the three projects have fundamental formal preoccupations in common, including: the relationship between aerial work and text; an ambition to make ‘spectacles of deconstruction’; a focus on the performing female aerialist; the occupation of vertical space; social and critical engagement; the (un)virtuosic body; and expanding the potential of aerial rope. In the process and performance outcomes of all these projects, the three-way relationship between aerial work, text, and concept has been my starting-point and impetus. This three-way dialogue or dynamic has dictated the presentational context for the aerial work, in terms of its choreography, staging and audience (or viewer) perspective. In doing this, I have attempted to set up a situation where the aerial form effectively works to develop and drive the critical concept, rather than the aesthetic and virtuosic qualities of aerial taking precedence, something that I argue is imperative in the creation of critical work. Aerial rope and performance artist Mozes presents the kind of integrated model I have strived for, during Australian circus company Acrobat’s three-person show *Smaller, Poorer, Cheaper* (2006). In this production, Mozes employs the ‘interrupted’ circus spectacle in order to disclose and communicate to the audience his HIV positive status, by means of a disappearing magic scarf routine that culminates with him pulling a red scarf out of his anus, and also in the form of an aerial rope act during which ‘blood’ drips from the ceiling, covering both him and the rope. In a similar manner, my practice and research overall has been invested in ways that allow personal experience and action, mediated through experimental aesthetics, to serve as a means to address wider social and political issues.

As noted, alongside the central questions pursued through this body of research, each individual creative project explores its own set of themes and enquiries. The first project undertaken, *My Brain is a Radio*, originated as a solo work for Theatre Delicatessen's artist development programme 'Horror Souk': it was performed in the old Woolworth's shop building at The Moor, Sheffield (2014) and subsequently developed for film (2015). *My Brain is a Radio* is a performative and semi-autobiographical exploration of anxiety disorder that uses aerial rope and ground-based actions, including chalking the walls and floor of the performance space. The project as a whole deals with the following themes: repetition; 'transverse pathways'; immersive theatre; film; the representation of mental illness through performance; live performance; text; pedestrian and un-virtuosic choreography; transition from live performance to film; sound art; the relationship between the floor and the rope; and autobiographical performance (Bogue, 2007, 3). The second project featured in this thesis is a body of work that has resulted in three discrete but interrelated live performances, *No Performance III*, *No Performance IV* and *Contra*. In 2015, I created a short text in response to the word 'No', for a research project headed by Terry O'Connor (of Forced Entertainment) that examined the word 'No', its meanings and implications. The text I wrote responded to the ways that different parts of my body felt policed by or framed within cultural views of women and women's bodies, and hence became the starting point for three different live performance works: *No Performance III* (a text-based performance triptych performed by myself and two other artists); *No Performance IV*; and subsequently, *Contra* (2017-present). *Contra* deal with themes of: the female body; queerness; biblical women; spectatorship; objectification; text and aerial work; and bodily nakedness. *Contra* has become a work that exists both as practice-based research and as a professional performance project, and has received direction from both O'Connor and artist Ursula Martinez. The final performance project considered in the thesis is entitled *1000 Claps* (2017), and addresses parallels between 'showmanship' and spectacle in aerial work and British politics. *1000 Claps* is inspired by DV8's *Can We Talk About This?* (2011), a dance-theatre piece that explores censorship, freedom of speech and Islam

using original verbatim interviews. *1000 Claps* explores the following themes and modes: verbatim theatre; film; aerial rope; political speeches; ‘showmanship’; spectacle; and sound art. It represents a response to the question I heard asked at CARD 2: Circus on the Edge in Stockholm, in 2015: ‘Where is the circus version of DV8?’.

Throughout my doctoral studies I have developed new and alternative methodologies with regard to creating, framing and analysing performance work that uses aerial rope. The use of practice-based research has been an integral and invaluable means of understanding, embodying and testing different methodologies, theories and questions. Furthermore, it has proved absolutely necessary with regard to comprehending the physical limitations of aerial work within the context of critically engaged performance. By the same means, practice-based research has drawn attention to my own limitations, specifically physically as an aerialist, but also in terms of my abilities, experience (or lack of) and areas of (dis)comfort, both artistically and performatively. Hence, the limits of physical, theoretical and cerebral abilities have necessarily set the parameters for this project and have also determined the products of my research. My doctoral project in its entirety engages with social and political issues, both in my choreographic and text-based practice, and in its use of aerial rope. Whilst I acknowledge that the ability of performance practice to provoke social and political change is controversial on many levels, I argue that it is still important to explore different means with which to make new connections and in the process illuminate and expose injustices, power structures and hierarchies. My artistic and academic research, via the employment of my aerial rope and broader performance practice, seeks to identify strategies for intervention, juxtaposition and reflection across personal, social and political spheres. Performance artist Richard DeDomenici describes this process as

...a bit like Jaws, you know when the shark is systematically searching for the weak structural

parts of the boat. Well, I am the shark and the boat is society. (Tate, 2008)

In this way, my practice adopts a methodology that is critically reflective, responsive and concerned with research as something that is subject to continuous metamorphosis. My interest is in creating performance practices that are socially engaged and critical of capitalist, neoliberal ideologies and through these I want to intervene in those systems and provoke change. It would be naive to assert that any performance can directly undo ingrained modes of thinking, incite revolt, or unseat those in power. However, performance, like any art form, is evidently capable of sparking debate, challenging beliefs, touching nerves: thus, on a micro-level, it operates subtly to change people. I argue that creative practices provide strategies with which we can examine current conditions and predicaments. Whilst undertaking my explorations I acknowledge my position as a white, queer, western woman, but also as an individual living in the world at present and with responsibility to act in/on it. My research into aerial performance has thus aimed to establish this as a potentially critical practice, able to transcend borders, demonstrate “liveness” in being human and vulnerable, and open up space for deviation, resistance and reconsideration.

# Chapter 1

## **Spectacle, Myths and Propaganda:**

### **A Short History of Circus, Aerial Performance and Spectacular Performance**

This chapter offers an overview of the history of circus and aerial work in Britain and in Europe, from the mid-eighteenth century until the present day. Further to this, it details an examination of the staging, choreography and marketing materials of contemporary circus, dance, live art and contemporary performance artists and companies, who either negotiate, or embrace, a relationship with virtuosity and performance spectacles in their work. Included within this analysis are: Tiny Kline; Lillian Leitzel; Archaos; No Fit State; Cirque Du Soleil; Vaslav Nijinsky; Isadora Duncan; Yvonne Rainer; Empress Stah, Vincent Riebeek & Florentina Holzinger; DV8; Lauren Barri Holstein; and Vincent Gambini (Augusto Corrieri). This chapter also introduces three key theoretical models that have underpinned my research: Guy Debord's notion of 'spectacle'; Baz Kershaw's 'spectacles of deconstruction'; and Laura Mulvey's 'male gaze' (Debord, 1983; Kershaw, 2003, 595; Mulvey, 1989). Debord's and Kershaw's theories have offered models for considering the political implications of the aerial spectacle and how it may be utilized within a critical performance work; in association with these deconstructive critiques, Mulvey's analysis of a 'male gaze' has supported my own investigation into gendered ways of looking and the problem and potential of 'woman as spectacle' (Mulvey, 1989, 20).

Throughout its evolution, the circus genre has managed to sustain two conflicting myths: by presenting the circus as an institution that both upholds traditional and mainstream values whilst welcoming individuals that exist on the fringes of society. Hence, this chapter details the genesis of the myths and

narratives embedded within the circus genre, such as progress, freedom, entertainment, dominance, glamour and heroism, and their subsequent association with aerial work. It identifies the circus genre's role as a form of social propaganda in the nineteenth century, and addresses the manner in which aerial work has functioned as a performative metaphor for colonial occupations of space and expansion, as enacted by the British Empire. Aerial performance has, throughout its history, mirrored social, political and technological advancements; from traditional circus to contemporary circus and other present day manifestations of aerial disciplines. Moreover, this chapter considers the circus genre's ongoing relationship with spectacle and virtuosity, and how this is reflective of its engagement with dominant power structures and hierarchies, in addition to narratives of progress, high achievement and perfection. Through examining the history of circus and how artists from genres and disciplines outside of circus have employed spectacle critically or deconstructively, this chapter considers how such models might offer innovative ways of staging, choreographing and perceiving aerial performance.

#### Circus and Mass Culture: 1768-1926

The evolution of circus performance can be traced back over centuries and many individual disciplines that are now associated with circus, such as acrobatics or juggling, have existed as popular forms of entertainment throughout history. Officially, the beginning of what is understood as 'modern circus' was instituted in 1768 by a former cavalry sergeant major in the military, Philip Astley (1742-1814), who began performing and hosting equestrian acts in a circular arena on the Southbank in London (Granfield & Jando 2010, 112). Prior to this, there are accounts of acts of a kind that later became embraced by circus being performed by court jesters and minstrels, and also street and fairground entertainers, from as early as the 1300s. According to Paul Ward, there were 'in London alone between 1570 and 1663 [...] 22 references to rope-dancing, 13 to tumblers, seven mentions of vaulting and five jugglers' (Ward, 2014, 13). Acts such as these would have been seen by people of different social classes, ranging from ordinary

villagers to members of the court. However, the etymology of what Paul Bouissac refers to as the circus ‘text’ or ‘narrative structure’ in *Semiotics at the Circus*, suggests that we are able to trace the origins of circus further back in time, effectively to the origins of humankind (Bouissac 2010, 22). Bouissac proposes that a circus act is in fact a ‘semiotic model’ of various signs, held together by an overarching ‘narrative’ structure (2010, 22). This ‘semiotic model’ is a performative code, within which elements such as staged failure, achievement and heroism are key. Thus, the disciplines or acts that have been developed within the context of this code are what have now come to be collectively understood to constitute circus. Similarly, Linda Granfield and Dominique Jando argue that

The first caveman who ever balanced a club on his nose to elicit the admiration of his friends (or hit himself on the head to make them laugh) was, in effect, sowing seeds of what would later become the circus. (Granfield & Jando 2010, 107)

The ‘caveman’ scenario, as described by Granfield and Jando, refers to a performance narrative, or set of narratives, which are embedded within elements such as the intention of entertainment, the desire for the spectacular, the display of prowess, and the risk of failure. These elements have continued to characterise and define circus in its present day form. In contemporary examples of circus, these qualities are manifested across a range of performance disciplines, and their associated apparatus, including clowning, aerial, floor acrobatics, juggling, tight-wire, hand balancing and trick-bike. However, it is arguably the narratives of risk, failure, spectacle and human achievement that are attached to these, rather than the disciplines and apparatuses themselves, which constitute what is commonly understood as circus. The institutionalization of circus performance as a genre cemented its connection with specific apparatus or performance styles and, beyond this, served to foster a now established relationship with audiences who

have grown to expect displays of daring, precarity and wonder. By understanding the history of circus performance and the evolution of aerial work, within and outside of circus, we are able to better understand contemporary readings of both, and thus how they might be considered in a critical context.

In *The Circus and Victorian Society*, Brenda Assael suggests that ‘chronologically, the circus may be divided in four key (although overlapping) periods: 1768-1820, 1820-60, 1860-80, and 1880 to 1900 (Assael, 2005, 3). Over these periods, from the mid-eighteenth century through to the beginning of the twentieth century, circus performance underwent progressive changes in style, venue and content. The first period, as described by Assael, refers to Philip Astley’s development and use of the circular arena, in conjunction with trick-riding and variety acts. Despite the changes that have occurred through the evolution of the genre, Astley’s model for circus, in terms of integrating different acts to form a larger, spectacular performance, is still evident now in the works of traditional circus companies such as Zippo’s Circus (1980-present) and Gerry Cottle’s Circus (1970-present). Originally, Astley had opened his equestrian arena as a riding school, but discovered that hosting trick riding performances and shows was more lucrative than giving riding lessons (National Circus and Fairground Archive, 2018). It was Astley’s combination of ‘horsemanship, rope-walking, juggling, acrobatics [...] performing dogs’ and ‘musical accompaniment [which] was the genesis of the circus entertainment we recognise today’ (National Circus and Fairground Archive, 2018). Although Astley is regarded as the person who officially started circus, it was Charles Dibdin, Astley’s contemporary and competitor, who laid claim to the term in order ‘to describe the mixture of horsemanship, comic turns and animal acts programmed as a theatrical spectacle’ (National Circus and Fairground Archive, 2018). During the 1700s, a circular space, such as London’s traffic roundabout, Piccadilly Circus, was referred to as a ‘circle’ or as the Latin ‘circus’. Hence, the term ‘circus’ was re-appropriated by Dibdin, to describe this emerging new performance genre, which, reminiscent of traffic in Piccadilly Circus, also used a circular arena. In London, 1782,

Dibdin and Charles Hughes, one of Astley's former trick riders, opened the Royal Circus and Equestrian and Philharmonic Academy, more commonly known as Hughes's Royal Circus or the Royal Circus. As Granfield and Jando note, the architectural design of the Royal Circus, 'with its lavish decoration and furnishings, and its vast theatre stage behind the equestrian ring', became the 'model for all circus buildings in Europe and the Americas until the end of the nineteenth century' (Granfield & Jando 2010, 112-113). Even Philip Astley, despite being their rival, utilized Hughes and Dibdin's architectural model for his own venues.

However, it was Astley's formula for circus performance, in terms of structural narrative and choice of acts, which became his ongoing legacy to the genre: 'by the start of the nineteenth century the majority of early circuses in America and Europe based their acts on ideas laid down by Philip Astley' (National Circus and Fairground Archive, 2018). This was adapted by both theatres and also by small, travelling family circuses, who performed on their own horses, generally in numbers of three or four. The family circuses adapted Astley's formula and usually followed equestrian acts with 'tumbling and tightrope performances' in a limited programme which was performed several times throughout the day (Assael 2005, 3). Saunders and Samwells are two examples of travelling family circus companies who toured their own shows, in addition to performing for and with other companies such as Astley's and Henglers. The dramatic increase in size of audiences and the overall popularity of circus had a profound effect on the manner in which circus was made and toured during the early to mid-nineteenth century. The influx of larger American-style three-ring circus performance was also highly influential, shifting both audience demands and expectations. Circus during the early to mid-nineteenth century, or the 'second phase' of circus (1820-60) as described by Assael, featured circus on a physically larger scale in the form of 'Hippodrama' (a form of equestrian dramatic circus) and 'military spectacles' (Assael 2005, 4). The re-enactment or representation of battle or war scenes was a popular theme employed by circuses and also

across other art forms of the period. Shows such as Astley's *Battle of Waterloo* capitalized on circus audiences' enthusiasm for, and interest in, warfare. The martial elements of Astley's circus were heavily influenced by Astley himself and his military experience: these included 'military-style brass bands (sometimes mounted) with uniformed performers, ring masters dressed like cavalry officers' and 'a fashion set by Astley's ringmaster Widdecombe, who also adopted the machine-like, superior military mien' (Hughes Myerly 1996, 146). This inclusion of militaristic components meant that the narratives of equestrian dramas during this period inevitably contained nationalistic agendas.

While the circus remained a form of popular entertainment, in this 'second phase' it also acted as a means of reinforcing social propaganda, by staging ideas of heroism, patriotism, national identity and the conquering of space. An especially popular theme in this period was that of the ordinary man who, by demonstrating his bravery and strength, becomes, or proves himself to be, a hero. The image of the male equestrian hero was particularly pertinent as a role model for audiences in the creation of British national identity during this period. Assael argues that this particular 'hero' was able to unify 'high and low cultures' and 'socially disparate audiences' by providing a male role model who embodied universal masculine values (Assael 2005, 46). This depiction of the hero through the circus in the 1800s was one of the first instances in which this image was represented within popular culture, in contrast with its frequent and long-standing illustration in 'high art' forms such as painting and sculpture. The iconography and representation of the hero, in addition to military spectacles performed by circuses during the 1800s, arguably contributed to British nationalistic agendas by re-enacting social propaganda in the form of entertainment. Assael argues:

When visually articulated in the ring, these military spectacles contributed to a culture of remembrance and hero worship in the same way as processions, parades, thanksgivings and anniversaries. These displays in the circus broadened the notion of the political beyond the boundaries of Parliament. Furthermore, by glorifying the nation's military activities – as opposed to radical anti-establishment activities in an unfinished revolution – the circus participated in a “flag-saluting, foreigner-hating, peer-respecting” plebeian culture that social historians [...] were once inclined to overlook. (Assael 2005, 47)

Through its spectacular reenactments of the Battle of Waterloo or the Napoleonic Wars, the circus reflected the ethos of the British Empire, which permeated social culture in this period. The 1800s saw what is referred to as the ‘Second British Empire’ (1783-1815) and ‘Britain’s Imperial Century’ (1815-1914). Prior to these, the first British Empire played a central role in the African Slave Trade, transporting over 3.5 million slaves across the Atlantic, from Africa to the British colonies in the Americas/Caribbean (Ferguson, 2012, 45). Although the slave trade was later officially abolished in 1807, Britain continued to expand its Empire and become a dominant global trader. The expansion of the British Empire during this period was responsible for ‘Britain’s emergence as the world’s richest nation’ (Porter, 1999, 1). Circus performance served as a means of communicating such events to the British public and, more importantly, for glorifying the actions of the British military. Astley, in particular, specialised in ‘creating a theatrical convention that mingled news events and spectacle’ (Assael, 2005, 48). Arguably this hybrid of historical events and theatrical exhibitionism resulted in a sensationalised narrative that served political interest and contributed to a social ethos of superiority.

Historically, there is a direct link between circus and colonialism. In her essay 'Feminine Free Fall: A Fantasy of Freedom', Peta Tait argues that in nineteenth century Australia, circus 'evoked an ideal of freedom within the context of a newly emerging colony which had rejected the old world' (Tait, 1996, 27). Conversely, the contrast between the ethos of freedom fronting the British Empire and the violent reality of colonial rule, was not represented in circus performances. Assael shows how circus during this period 'contributed to a culture of myth making' by fusing fiction and fact to form new historical narratives. Imperial expansion and, more broadly, the actions of the British Empire, in the nineteenth century and in its longer legacy, was responsible for a wide range of long-lasting problems, particularly 'those concerning boundaries, ethnic rivalry, the uneven distribution of resources, human-rights violations, and lack of good governance' (Marker, 2003). Such actions were then, and still continue to be in the present day, countered by less condemning narratives of discovery and exploration. Circus performance during the nineteenth century played a role in enlivening colonial narratives of discovery and importantly, in reaffirming Britain's 'quality of national character' as courageous, powerful and explorative (Ahmed, 2010, 132). The spectacular nature of circus attracted large and diverse audiences, making it a useful means for communicating stories and ideas. Given its physical scale, circus performance provided an ideal medium for representing the size of armies, which were required and utilized by Britain during this period. Furthermore, circus shows were able to accommodate and physicalize on a large scale binaries such as good and bad, or civil and savage, which underpinned the philosophies of the period. Assael remarks that imperial conflicts, like the wars that had preceded these, effectively provided

a theatrical occasion for narrating a version of recent events. In these narratives about the colonizer and the colonized, clear boundaries were drawn between a savage East and a civilized West. (Assael 2005, 75)

Circus's potential to combat 'barbarism' and promote 'civility' was exploited in shows like Astley's *The Storming and Capture of Delhi* (1857). This show loosely dramatised the Indian soldiers' rebellion against the authority of the East India Company, a revolt which aimed to reinstate the authority of the Mughal Empire (Osborn, 1868). *The Storming and Capture of Delhi* enacted this rebellion, showing how the British soldiers managed to recapture the city and suppress the rebels. It could be said that such works contributed to a remembrance of the British Empire as a great moral achievement, rather than as a history of plunder and pillage. Beyond this, they helped to establish early circus performance as a means of dramatizing real events and simultaneously demonstrating Western culture's desire to dominate other societies, species and territories.

The use of circus to reenact wars and the activities of the British Empire continued into Assael's 'third phase' of circus history, between 1860 and 1880. The 'third phase' saw a growth in the size of circus performances, in addition to variety acts increasing in popularity over purely equestrian drama (Assael 2005, 4). This shift in the size and nature of circus performances coincided with an economic shift in Britain and the emergence of the leisure industry. According to Assael, the closure of some important urban fairs meant that a considerable number of variety performers (including aerialists) sought employment with circuses and thus these acts began to dominate circus shows (Assael 2005, 5). The invention of the trapeze (1860) and the development of flying trapeze acts changed the way in which circus was spatially performed and experienced. Witnessing a flying trapeze act became a new

brehtaking spectacle to be consumed in accordance with the ideals of the emerging leisure industry. In this manner, there was also a dramatic increase in female circus performers, who utilized and responded to social and scientific ideologies of the period, which considered women to be physically and intellectually inferior to men. The usually repressed and restrained female body presented in a superior athletic context, not only made the circus spectacle more impressive and dramatic but also utilized the sexual appeal of female performers. This became increasingly pertinent within the developing leisure industry, within ‘which money was exchanged for visual gratification’ (Assael 2005, 109).

George Sanger was one leading circus proprietor in this period. Sanger was the son of a showman, and initially developed Sangers’ Travelling Circus with his brother John (Ward, 2014, 90). In 1871, George Sanger bought Astley’s amphitheatre in London and went on to stage his own ‘large scale equestrian spectacles’, whilst still continuing to present shows at the Agricultural Hall in London and tour travelling circus performances, both in Britain and in Europe. He presented shows on an enormous scale, such as *The War in China* (1871), an equestrian drama with a cast of over 1,500 (Ward, 2014, 91-92). Sanger’s style typically mixed ‘circus with displays of animals, expansive equestrian dramas and pantomimes’ (Ward, 2014, 93). During this period of British colonial rule, it was not uncommon to see wild or exotic animals in circuses, such as elephants or tigers. According to Assael, ‘the exotic animal [...] became a metonym for progress’ and of western mankind’s superiority over nature (Assael, 2005, 69). Scientific and philosophic research during the 1800s, particularly Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871), also proved highly influential and was reflected in many facets of British culture, including circus. Themes of western, and specifically British or American, supremacy were central to Darwin’s analysis, and served as justification for Britain’s continued colonial rule. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin claimed that ‘the western nations of Europe’ surpassed ‘their former savage progenitors’ and stood ‘at the summit of civilization’ (Darwin 1871, 172). Darwin also refers to the

‘immorality of savages’ and condoned the colonisation of indigenous communities on the basis of western moral superiority (Darwin, 1871, 93). These ideas of moral superiority and the conquering of space were evident in circus, not only taking the form of literal re-enactments but also reflected in the choice of acts and how they were presented. In particular, aerial acrobatics offered an exploration and occupation of space that, as Tait argues, implicitly echoed the political objectives of the British Empire:

Even though it did not in itself present an imperialist narrative, aerial performance could not be considered innocuous within the sequential programming of a range of acts in variety shows. There was a meta-cultural significance in the juxtaposition of flying acts demonstrating bodily mastery of air space and spectacles presenting expansionist stories of conquered geographical space... Aerial performance confirmed a belief that European culture was headed towards an unstoppable domination of the natural world and non-European societies. Abstract aerial performance did not replay political events, but it fitted alongside spectacles that validated nineteenth century ideas of empire and spatial domination. (Tait 2005, 13)

The fact that aerial work was physically performed higher than the other circus acts, including animals, and above the watching audience, also served to reinforce dominant ideologies of social hierarchy and superiority. As aerial acrobatic technique evolved to become increasingly virtuosic and skillful, the performing aerialist implicitly became an embodiment of western progress, and reinforced Darwinian ideals. Aerial performers such as Mademoiselle Azella and Jules Leotard, who specialized in flying trapeze, were renowned for their exceptional skill and prowess. The image of the seemingly ‘flying’ human body served to reinforce notions of scientific advancement, demonstrating that humans had evolved beyond ‘Icarus mythologies’, to make dreams of flying a reality.

The technological advancements of the fin-de-siècle and the corresponding ‘fourth phase’ of circus (1880-1914) according to Assael, inadvertently set new goals for circuses and circus artists in terms of size, spectacle and technical ability (Assael, 2005, 5). The changes that were occurring in terms of ‘big capital, high science, and complex technology’ meant that, increasingly, what was once impossible was being made possible (Mann, 2012-2013, 597). Expeditious economic and technological growth in the majority of western countries directly affected the size and manner in which circus work was made and toured. Hence, circus performances reflected the ideas of progress attached to the advent of the second industrial revolution, particularly in relation to their use of venue and overall size, the virtuosic nature of acts and also the size and exotic heritage of animals used in performance. Circus performance was no longer the only remarkable spectacle and it had to compete with other developments in and of society, as they became more impressive and as ‘societies became more urbanized and industrialized’ (Mann, 2012-2013, 597). The influx of American circuses that came to Britain during the late nineteenth century fueled the public’s inquisitiveness for ‘exotic people’, as they often used performers from non-western countries, such as Africa or India, in their shows. In 1889-1890, Barnum and Bailey took the *The Greatest Show on Earth* from America to the London Olympia, where it achieved great fame and success. *The Greatest Show on Earth* was a hippodrama on an enormous scale, featuring a cast of over 1,000 performers and an array of different animals including 20 performing elephants and 32 camels (Albrecht, 2014, 26). Michael Diamond describes the show as a ‘wild beast and equestrian procession and pageant’, criticised only on the grounds that ‘there was so much going on at once in the three rings that it was impossible to take it all in’ (Diamond 2004, 284). The show’s finale was a re-enactment of ‘Nero or the Destruction of Rome’, which featured ‘chariot races, races for elephants and camels, gladiatorial combats, and a riot of Roman citizens’ (Diamond, 2004, 284). The show was premised on the fight between Christianity and Paganism, communicated through ‘mimed action’ and ‘accompanied by an orchestra and

a huge choir that sang several hymns and odes' (Albrecht, 2014, 28). Other successful circus events by Barnum and Bailey during this period include *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*, which was performed at Earls Court in 1887 to an audience of 20,000 (Lorimer, 2015, 113). The production featured a cast of "Show Indians", who were Native American performers employed by touring American Wild West shows. Diamond observes that 'never had England seen so many American Indians or so many exotic North American animals as they saw at Earls Court' (Diamond, 2004, 280). George Sanger, inspired by the success of *Buffalo Bill*, began to include similar scenes within his own shows (Ward 2016, 46). Queen Victoria was so impressed with *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show* that she requested a private performance the day before jubilee celebrations (Diamond 2004, 280). Douglas A. Lorimer asserts that, by attending a 'private performance' of the show, Queen Victoria 'gave the royal stamp of respectability to the encounter between American Cowboys and [...] the 'Redskins''; in this way, 'Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show', along with numerous other circus performances, contributed to a culture of 'dominating imperialism' in Britain (Lorimer, 2015, 113). What is more, performances such as these served to 'sustain cultural myths of the Other' and to promote the notion that the 'savage indian' (or other non-western person) had no place in modern western civilization (McNenly 2014, 146). In this manner, circus during this period continued to reinforce narratives of western superiority through spectacular performance, and in doing so both competed with and promoted notions of technological and societal 'progress'.

After the turn of the twentieth century, circus continued to develop in line with technological and cultural advancements, such as aviation and the film and music industries. Touring and large scale circuses continued to make shows, and circus variety acts also became adopted by variety theatre, the silent film industry and, in America, in the form of vaudeville. American vaudeville trapeze artist and strongwoman

‘Charmion’<sup>2</sup> starred in a 1901 film by Thomas Edison, where she performed a striptease trapeze act. Films such as this changed the context in which circus acts could be viewed and reproduced. The mass marketing and mass producing increasingly in evidence culturally threatened the livelihood of live performance (Erdman, 2007, 9). According to Ward, the death of George Sanger in 1911 marked the beginning of ‘a dark and gloomy period’ for the British circus industry (Ward, 2016, 46). The expansion of other leisure activities such as science, sports, music halls and most of all ‘the growth of the cinematograph all took their toll’ by ‘drawing audiences away from the circus’ (Ward, 2016, 46). In order to compete, the circus had to continue producing ever more impressive spectacles in line with the modern audience’s desires. Aerial acts, for example, had always been implicitly connected with other practices of ‘aviation’, such as hot air balloons, in their navigation of space and creation of elevated spectacle. However, the invention of the aeroplane in 1903 set a new standard for circus acts in terms of the human body in space. Aeroplanes manifestly represented a new kind of freedom, whereby a human pilot or passenger could cross oceans and nation borders via the air. Technological progressions in aerospace placed humans at the top of the vertical hierarchy and, furthermore, meant that the imperialist empire was not only expanding globally but also further out towards space. In her study of twentieth-century travel writing, Sidonie Smith remarks:

Dreams of flight that had preoccupied human beings for centuries, informing their myths, their imaginations, their science of observation, and their mechanical inventions, materialised in mid-air. Spectators, reporters, and pilots themselves, proclaimed the end of the old order and the

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<sup>2</sup> Link to *Trapeze Disrobing Act (1901) - CHARMION - Edwin S. Porter | Thomas Edison* (Change Before Going Productions, 2016)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73b12OC7EYo>

dawn of the new, one in which humans would defy the laws of gravity to conquer even the skies.  
(Smith 2001, 74)

Circuses and specifically aerial artists were aware of the mythologies attached to aviation and tried to emulate and exploit these in their performances. However, whereas aviation was centred on the idea of ‘man’ conquering machinery, aerialism appeared to show ‘man’ conquering natural forces such as gravity. While aerialists in circuses or theatres could not go as physically high as aeroplanes, they could use their trained gymnastic bodies to ‘fly through the air’ in a multitude of ways. This, in some ways, illustrates the extent to which the circus and its human performers had to compete with the engineering and mechanical machinery of the early twentieth century; it also shows how the spectacle of the working human body was being replaced and potentially superseded by machinery after the Second Industrial Revolution and in the wake of mass production.

The outbreak of World War 1 in 1914 had a pronounced effect on circus companies and the entertainment industry overall. Many men working in circus were obliged to join the Army and women had to dedicate time to the war effort (Ward 2016, 46). Some well-established British circuses such as Sangers had to close until the end of the war, due to a restriction of resources, the risk of losing performers to conscription and the financial implications of a new ‘Entertainment tax’, which was introduced to raise money for the war effort (Ward 2016, 47-48). After the end of the war, the circus industry was in recession until when, in 1920, Bertram Mills opened his new and highly successful show *The Great International Circus*. Mills’s show was described by the press as the ‘Great Circus Revival’ and continued to go from strength to strength, drawing in huge audiences and gaining the support of politicians and other authority figures (Stacey, 2018). The circus during this period provided an ideal

metaphor for the renewed strength of the British public after the First World War. This was reflected in the self-promotional material provided by circuses of the period. For example, in a *Circus at Olympia*, Bertram Mills' programme for a season of shows in 1926, it is stated that 'there is something virile, something ultra British about the Circus. There are no half-measures about it – no mere mimicry of reality, but actual feats of human prowess' (Bertram Mills, 1926, 3). Unlike theatre, circus performance was presented as though without artifice and as the staging of "real" events with real risks. Mills' circus hosted a great number of national and international circus artists, notably The Flying Codonas (an aerial flying trapeze troupe), Charlie Rival (a clown), Albert Powell (a contortionist) and Lillian Leitzel (an aerialist). Importantly, Mills managed to find a place for and reestablish circus as a live entertainment form, during and alongside 'the Golden Age of Hollywood', when film work was dominating western culture and audience interest. Mills emphasised the unique capacities of the traditional circus, reasserting their importance in the twentieth century:

The Circus restores the sense of proportion. Presently you will see that it is still very important to be able to walk on a wire or pass gracefully from one trapeze to another: and the survival of these old-fashioned modes of locomotion in this mechanical age is a cheering thing. None of us is allowed to be "different" nowadays: and this assembly of eccentric individuals, boldly doing things in public, must be a good corrective to the standardisation which threatens all of us, though I hope that it will not lead you to Knife-Throwing or Acrobacy. (Bertram Mills, 1935)

Mills and other proprietors of the time presented circus as something that sustained traditional values and also served to counter a new culture of reproduction. By posing the threat of 'standardization', Mills was able to offer the circus as an antithesis that premised individuality. What is more, this binary of

‘standardization’ versus ‘individuality’ further established circus as a genre that existed on the fringes of society and that welcomed people who existed outside of societal norms. Hence, the circus was able to be marketed as something which upheld tradition whilst simultaneously including those who challenged tradition, despite the inherent contradictions in marrying these two things. It represented an old form of family entertainment that, whilst being inclusive, appealed to audiences concerned by the fast-paced nature of technological progress. As I will show, this image of the traditional circus and the myths that enabled it to be re-marketed and promoted as a form of entertainment have continued to dominate circus performance and circus disciplines to the present day.

#### Ideas, Associations, Myths and Paradoxes

Circus disciplines in contemporary works have retained ideas from traditional circus, such as the challenging of human limits and physical space, and the embodiment of metaphors of progress.

Throughout history, there have also been a number of circus artists who have attempted to take their acts out of the circus environment and instead perform them in other locations, such as high-rise buildings, waterfalls, airplanes and hot air balloons. When applied in site-specific contexts, circus acts have the potential to undermine, rival or reinforce engineered structures, natural wonders, powerful ideas and technological advancements. The image of a (by comparison) small human being in juxtaposition with a vast and imposing natural or urban landscape would usually render the human insignificant. However, the presentation of risk and physical dexterity, inherent in circus disciplines, has the potential to renegotiate the power distribution between human and landscape. Two early examples of circus artists who performed their acts outside of the circus tent are Harry Leslie and Charles Blondin. In 1868, Leslie performed an act on a static trapeze that was rigged to a floating hot air balloon and was one of the first performers and aeronauts to execute this feat. In an artist’s representation of the event, the air balloon is painted with the words “United States”, a possible reference to America’s colonization and recently

established national identity at the time. Similarly, in 1859, the high-wire artist Blondin crossed the Niagara gorge, which is located on the USA-Canadian border, on a tightrope. The site-specific nature of Blondin's and Leslie's performances meant that the fallible human body was placed alongside colossal aspects of the earth's geography, such as the sky and fifty-metre high waterfalls. In the same way that aerialists in traditional circus demonstrated 'a mastery of air space', both performances by Blondin and Leslie, were executed as a demonstration of human progress and the desire to 'conquer' space and the natural world (Tait 2005, 13). This argument can, I propose, also be applied to more recent examples of site-specific aerial performance, as when in 1974 Philippe Petit illegally walked across a tightwire he had strung between the twin towers in New York City (USA); Petit's desire to make the 'impossible possible' is reminiscent of the American Dream ideology that underpins ideas of progress. In a similar manner, aerialist Seanna Sharpe illegally performed an aerial silks routine on the Williamsburg Bridge in New York (USA) in 2011, where she was 285 ft above the crowds below. Like Petit, Blondin and Leslie, Sharpe intended her performance to draw attention not only to risk and human fallibility but also to her spatial occupation and physical virtuosity. In all these examples, the performers' work is superimposed onto an environment rather than the environment influencing the content of the work. While Sharpe's act took place outside the circus tent and theatre context, it still retained core aesthetic values of traditional circus, such as spectacle and daring; her red leotard served as an additional reminder that she was a circus performer, even if removed from the circus environment.

The relationship between traditional circus, specifically aerial work, and the aesthetic of glamour and 'dazzlement', is another legacy that affects how circus disciplines are still read in the present day.

Glamour became a defining factor of circus during the 1920s, a period where circus artists such as Lillian Leitzel became celebrities, much like the film stars of the period (Stoddart 2000, 56-57). Leitzel was an aerialist and strong woman who worked for both Barnum and Bailey and Ringling Bros circuses. Her act

was famous for its repetitive use of one arm dislocations and side planches<sup>3</sup>. It was during this period that large companies such as Bertram Mills, Barnum and Bailey and Ringling Bros were experiencing international successes. The ‘Roaring Twenties’ was a time of prolonged economic prosperity, which in turn enabled the accelerated growth of the arts and entertainment industry. However, a contending narrative views circus as an art born out of a subversive or transgressive performance culture. A strand of existing scholarship and writing on circus connects circus performance, and circus culture, with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories on carnival. Bakhtin claims that carnival celebrates ‘temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order’ and that ‘it marked the suspension from all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions’ (Bakhtin, 1984, 10). The different marketing strategies of circus companies throughout the decades, have utilized similar ideas to sell the circus experience ‘as an escape from everyday life where normal rules do not apply’ (Bertram Mills, 1926, 3). Traditional circus advertising and propaganda, in common with many marketing strategies, was not necessarily grounded in truth, but rather played on audiences’ desires for escapism and entertainment. It could be argued that traditional circus has evolved to serve political and cultural agendas, such as (as I have discussed) the British Empire’s colonial expansion. However, as I discuss later, in the early nineteenth century the circus *did* offer female circus artists some physical freedoms that they would not have been afforded outside of the circus environment.

Within the history of traditional circus, the physicality of aerialists has dictated costume requirements. Costumes worn by aerialists in, or in the style of, traditional circus were usually some variation of a sequined or beaded leotard, worn with tights or bare legs. Some aerial performers, particularly swing trapeze artists, wore ‘gaiters’ or ‘trapeze boots’ to protect their shins, ankles and the tops of their feet from friction burns. Costumes worn by aerialists were designed so as to not hinder their ability to climb or

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<sup>3</sup> See index of aerial choreography

to fly through the air. In the 1920s, costumes for female aerialists working in traditional circus were designed to accentuate 'feminine' parts of the body, such as the breasts and hips. Kate Holmes describes these women aerialists as 'aristocrats of the air', dressed in sumptuous and glamorous costumes, seemingly free from both the 'constraints of gravity' and 'financial concern' (Holmes, 2017, 304-5). Conversely, the physical performance and strength demonstrated by female aerialists challenged this notion of traditional femininity. At the same time, male aerialists of the period were portrayed as 'muscular athletes', despite the aerial aesthetic of beauty and dexterity (Tait, 2005, 14-15). Tait comments:

Aerialists in the nineteenth century were attributed physical qualities that mixed up their gender identity. The aerial action of males was praised for manly daring and for graceful lightness and poise, qualities of movement that were more conventionally the preserve of femininity.

Similarly, female aerialists were described as beautiful, and as adventurous and courageous, traits that were considered manly. (Tait, 2005, 9)

The displacement of gendered traits regarding the physicality of both male and female aerialists, undermined social narratives surrounding gender roles during the 1920s. This was especially provocative and pertinent as, towards the mid twentieth century, the presentation and costuming of aerialists was largely governed by mainstream ideas of male and female gender roles and aesthetics. However, one notable exception was the male transvestite trapeze and hire-wire performer Vander Clyde, better known as 'Barbette', who achieved success in the Parisian avant-garde performance scene of the 1920s. After working as part of a duo entitled the 'Alfaretta Sisters', Barbette developed a successful, solo act dressed as a woman. Barbette was described in publicity material as a 'man-woman'; Vander Clyde's act openly

explored the space between female and male gender binaries (Tait, 2005, 70). Mark Franko argues that, as a result of Barquette's performances, 'bisexual spectatorship' emerged 'from the conventionally gendered public' (Franko, 1995, 97). Franko notes artist Jean Cocteau's fascination with Barquette's enigmatic approach to gender and the manner in which it impacted his movement quality as an aerialist, quoting Cocteau's description of Barquette as one who 'appeals to those who see the woman in him, to those who guess he is a man and to others whose soul is moved by the supernatural sex of beauty' (Cocteau c.f. Franko, 1995, 97). Cocteau completed a series of photographic and paint works taking inspiration from Barquette's queer aesthetic and identity. Both Barquette's endeavors as an aerial artist, and Cocteau's interpretations of them, challenged early-twentieth century ideas regarding gender and sexuality. Specifically, they would have raised questions concerning how gender in the period was naturalized and performed, in both everyday life and in a theatrical context.

In her article 'Aspirational circus glamour: rethinking the circus grotesque through female aerialists of the inter-war period', circus researcher Kate Holmes challenges assumptions about circus's place in wider culture. Holmes criticizes previous scholarship that has misread circus acts as 'grotesque', likewise challenging the association of circus with Bakhtin's perspective on 'carnival' (Holmes, 2017, 300). Holmes argues that this 'misrepresentation [...] has significant implications because it places the circus in a carnivalesque relationship to society', when in actuality it was, and remains, a mainstream entertainment form:

The largest circuses of the 1920s and the early 1930s were glamorous, not carnivalesque, because they were a significant component of mainstream culture. Companies such as Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey and Bertram Mills Circus were the largest mass entertainments in the USA

and UK respectively – these were enterprises that were a central part of culture and not marginal. Unlike carnival and the grotesque, glamour enacts change from within. It is by appropriating wealth to generate status that glamour has the power to reframe what borders on transgressive as acceptable. (Holmes, 2017, 300)

The argument that circus should be understood within mainstream as opposed to alternative culture, and as an art form notably shaped by mass production, can be further evidenced by the ways in which circus artists were used as part of advertising campaigns and corporate enterprise during the mid-twentieth century. As Janet Davis notes, aerialist Lillian Leitzel ‘pitched a cornucopia of products’ such as ‘Lysol, Walworth Stillson Wrench and Grandma Brown’s Ginger Tea Tablets’ (Davis, 2002, 116); Antoinette Concello, who was part of the Flying Concellos, a flying trapeze troupe, was also featured on a Camel cigarettes advertisement<sup>4</sup>. On their advertising Camel cigarettes featured Concello, in addition to human cannonball performers Hugo and Mario Zacchini, and equine circus artist Dorothy Herbert, as ‘Stars of the Circus’ (R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., 1937). Concello is quoted as saying ‘I enjoy all the pleasure of smoking as often as I please’ and ‘you see, I’m a loyal camel smoker. Camels never ruffle my nerves’ (R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., 1937). In this way, Camel cigarettes were presented as a product able to calm its users, even in the face of an extremely nerve-wracking and high pressured activity such as circus performance. Conversely, the featured circus artist utilized within the advertisement became, what Debord describes as, an object ‘that people can identify with’ (Debord, 1983, 29). Aerial performers, such as Concello, featured in advertisements during this period became canvases onto which the needs of corporate interest could be projected. Another example of the appropriation of circus and its associations within corporate enterprise is embodied in Tiny Kline’s performance contract as Tinkerbell at Disneyland

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<sup>4</sup> Link to ‘Stars of the Circus’, Camel Cigarettes advertisement in *Life Magazine* (1937)  
<http://tinyurl.com/69sldhy>

(1961-1964), as part of which Kline's image as a performer was merged with that of The Walt Disney Company. Although artists such as Kline, Leitzel, Concello, and others like them, were widely perceived as celebrities or 'stars', their physical abilities were also commodified and exploited by circuses and corporations as a means with which to engage public interest. Star circus artists were required to 'tread a difficult line between the extraordinary and the banal': in that they must 'be exceptional in some highly visible way', as demonstrated by their circus practice, whilst also possessing sufficient 'attributes of ordinariness' in order to 'facilitate identification and empathy' from consumers (Stoddart, 2000, 56). This image of the circus artist, which juxtaposes the ordinary or mundane with the exceptional and spectacular is something that years later, became a defining characteristic of contemporary circus companies such as NoFit State. In this way, circus artists become 'spectacular representations of living human beings' and the 'banality' of their existence projected into 'images of permitted' roles (Debord, 1983, 29). In the early to mid twentieth century, artists like Kline, Leitzel and Concello contributed to a propaganda of social representation, which spectacularized the everyday as a means of economic production. Hence, the involvement of traditional circus in multinational mass media, entertainment and consumer product advertising continued to support the imperialist notion of human progress and capitalist expansion, as initially promoted by the British Empire.

### Contemporary Circus

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, French company Archaos employed circus to interrogate ideas of queerness and androgyny through their touring shows. Pierre Bidon founded Archaos, a company widely considered as a pioneer in contemporary circus. In common with the majority of contemporary circus companies, Archaos was an animal-free circus. They attempted to discard previous circus conventions and aesthetics, instead promoting a hybrid performance form drawing on circus, theatre, film

and music. In contrast with the glamour and extravagance of traditional circus, Archaos favoured a DIY punk aesthetic. In 1990, a show by the company was banned by Bristol Council (UK) ‘following tabloid descriptions of nude trapeze artists and ‘men dancing together’’ (Tait, 2005, 121). This was one of many instances where their work shocked a portion of circus and theatre audiences, whilst delighting others. Archaos claimed to reject all tradition, but Bidon's genius was as a moderniser of tradition:

His Mad Max gang of artists juggled chainsaws, not hoops or Indian clubs; rode motorbikes, not horses; flew from forklift trucks and cranes; survived freak "accidents"; and set themselves on fire. But behind all the trappings of punk and clashing metal, Archaos expressed their ideas with good old feats of physical skill. (Seelig, 2010)

Seelig's account suggests that rather than abandoning traditional narratives altogether, Archaos still retained these in a new guise in the individual acts at the core of their shows. *Metal Clown* (1992) recreated ‘the history of slavery and the invasion of European pioneers and conquistadores’ using ‘semi-trailers, crazy motorcycles and other extravagant vehicles’ in place ‘of boats’ (Archaos, 2014). Archaos explain the dystopian characters within this work by saying that ‘Europe brings with it its heterogeneous inhabitants [...] The conquistadores are the clowns of metal’ (Archaos, 2014). During *Metal Clown* there is a flying trapeze act performed by Germain Guillemot, Come Doerflinger, Jean Antoine Veran and Fabrice Champion<sup>5</sup>. The act features the trapeze artists performing a flying act accompanied by rock music fronted by Dan Spanner on the saxophone. The trapezists are costumed in unitards or jeans, some wearing clown masks. The act is based on a series of challenging flying and catching sequences, complete with double somersaults and pirouettes. The performers lean out and

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<sup>5</sup> Link to *Thunderdogs/Trapéze Volant, 'Metal Clown' Cirque Archaos* (Spanner HQ, 2009)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgYuduBAf10>

theatrically gesture to the crowd in between swings, embodying the chaotic and dissonant qualities of the music. Peta Tait has argued that new or contemporary circus ‘remains closer to theatre in its aesthetic and thematic purpose’ (Tait, 2005, 120). However, despite the embellishments and shift in theme, the choreographic material and nature of the swinging trapeze act in ‘Metal Clown’ still had its roots in traditional circus. However, the intention of *Metal Clown* and of Archaos’ work more generally was to oppose existing political narratives embedded within contemporary culture, whereas traditional circus largely sought to reinforce them. Archaos were the first circus troupe to deliberately confront and undermine myths attached to traditional circus, using forms of subversion and gestures of inclusivity. Unlike the circus of the mid-twentieth century, Archaos explicitly sought to challenge gender norms, whilst promoting queerness and anarchy.

As influential as Archaos in the same period was the company Cirque du Soleil, likewise credited with forging a new path in the circus genre. Whilst Archaos delivered anti-capitalist rhetoric in their performances, Cirque du Soleil offered escapism set in colourful, fantastical and futuristic worlds. Cirque du Soleil initially grew in size and in popularity during the economic prosperity of the 1990s. Their shows established a distinctive style based on a combination of different circus disciplines including aerial, juggling, acrobatics, contortion and clowning, with the accompaniment of a live musical score. Performers in their shows today are often costumed as animals or as imaginary creatures, in patterned lycra unitards and leotards, and with extravagant face paint. Cirque du Soleil’s shows typically feature performers masquerading as animals, imaginary creatures or the elements (earth, water, wind and fire), frequently with a ‘tribal’ theme or subtext. The shows prioritise large-scale, highly technical spectacular acrobatic display over and above thematic content or narrative, and this emphasis has sometimes been a focus of criticism. In response to their 2018 show *Ovo*, for example, reviewer Luke Jennings for the

*Guardian* comments – with the subheading ‘all glory and no story’ - that ‘the global circus troupe’s insect-themed extravaganza is technically astonishing but fails to engage on a deeper level’ (Jennings, 2018). The reliance on music as a tool with which to provoke and direct audience responses is another criticism sometimes made of Cirque du Soleil’s work. Emotive and dramatic music is used to draw feelings such as trepidation, fear, suspense, sadness from spectating audiences. As with filmic scores, the music provides key indicators for the audience so that they know when there are moments of risk, danger or achievement, and thus how to respond appropriately; however, while the live music could be viewed as a means of adding elements of narrative direction and complexity, this use, as in the film context, also risks sensationalizing onstage action and overshadowing theatrical dramaturgy. Notwithstanding, despite such criticisms Cirque du Soleil remains one of the most financially successful touring performance companies, with an annual revenue of over \$850 million.

Tait argues that contemporary circus has ‘an overarching emotional tone’ that was absent in traditional circus (Tait, 2005, 120). While the example of Cirque du Soleil suggests that ‘emotional’ power might in some cases be borrowed from musical accompaniment as much as it is based in theatrical craft, contemporary circus in general still distances itself from the structure of its earlier forms. The incorporation of a more theatrical dimension into circus has in turn allowed greater scope for presenting narratives and addressing issues. Furthermore, the merging of theatrical narratives with circus disciplines has opened up new possibilities in terms of using the genre to communicate ideas and stories, and to reflect broader social concerns. However, aerial work, within the context of contemporary circus, for the most part typically seeks to uphold aesthetic qualities of freedom and ease (qualities which characterised traditional circus) rather than choosing to push the diversity of the genre’s communication. This aesthetic of ‘ease’ is evident in the works of contemporary circus companies such as No Fit State, Cirque Eloize,

Cantina, Les 7 Doigts and Cirkvost and within cabaret and corporate aerial work. Additionally, the historic use of aerial to harness metaphors of flight is still wholly apparent in contemporary aerial and circus work. Stoddart notes that traditionally ‘great stock was placed in the myth of this female figure who appears to transcend social space and her own body’, a motif that ‘continue[s] to mark representational accounts of the aerialist to the present day’ (Stoddart, 2000, 171). Stoddart’s analysis can be applied to the promotional images from NoFit State’s show *Bianco* (2012-2017) that feature a female aerialist sat on a trapeze in what appears to be mid-flight<sup>6</sup>. The picture is taken against a black backdrop and without any reference to the ground or to any kind of ‘social space’ (Stoddart, 2000, 171). The promotional material for *Bianco* also includes an image of male aerial straps artist August Dakteris performing what is known in aerial choreographic terms as a ‘flag’ or ‘side planche’<sup>78</sup>. Dakterist is balanced over one arm, looking down to what is beneath him. There is stage light shining from behind him, giving the impression that he is flying through the sky in front of a bright sun; the image is reminiscent of the Icarian mythology that infiltrated nineteenth century circus works.

One element that has noticeably shifted in the transition from traditional to contemporary circus is the choice of costumes that are now used. In the work of contemporary circus companies such as NoFit State and Ockham's Razor, the performer is often in ‘everyday’ or ‘pedestrian’ clothing such as a t-shirt or jeans, as worn by Dakteris in *Bianco*. The presentation of performers in such clothing could be regarded as an attempt to ‘normalize’ them, yet paradoxically their astonishing feats appear even more extraordinary as a result. If a circus artist is clad in a sequined leotard and tights, before the performance has even begun the audience already anticipates their prowess; by contrast, the casually dressed performer

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<sup>6</sup> Link to No Fit State Circus promotional image from *Bianco*  
<https://tinyurl.com/ya5xrdmk>

<sup>7</sup> see index or aerial choreography

<sup>8</sup> Link to No Fit State Circus promotional image from *Bianco* (aerial straps)  
<https://tinyurl.com/ya96joch>

does not look like a circus artist and is not, therefore, expected to demonstrate exceptional physical skills. Thus the presentation of the circus artist in pedestrian clothing operates as a double-edged gesture which humanizes the performer whilst still exhibiting their superhuman qualities, as mentioned earlier in the chapter. This idea of the circus 'superhuman' has evolved from traditional circus narratives surrounding the military hero. The contemporary adaptation of this hero is the superhero: s/he who demonstrates extraordinary physical prowess, beyond the normal range of human capability.

### Theoretical models: Spectacle, Deconstruction and the 'Gaze'

This section provides a brief overview of the key theoretical models applied in this thesis as a means of contextualising, understanding and analysing aerial performance. I introduce Guy Debord's concept of the 'spectacle', a philosophical critique of consumerist culture that Debord initially developed in *The Society of the Spectacle* (first published 1967). My discussion then turns to the more recent work of Baz Kershaw, whose proposal for 'spectacles of deconstruction' recognises the dangers of the spectacular form but also argues for its activist potential (Kershaw, 2003). Third, I consider Laura Mulvey's influential hypothesis of a 'male gaze', a term coined by her with reference to a cinematic context, but which, I suggest, can be productively applied to live performance also (Mulvey, 1989). Together, the perspectives of Debord, Kershaw and Mulvey have provided a critical framework through which it becomes possible to understand the history of aerial performance, its appeal to audiences and, crucially, the challenges and opportunities of this form for contemporary socially-engaged art practice. These collective theoretical perspectives provide a way of understanding/analysing aerial work, its historical relevance, its position within the broader spectrum of performance practices, and crucially, its relation to and reflection of society as a whole.

The thinking of Debord and Kershaw valuably supports an understanding of the political implications of aerial practice and how spectacular form may be utilized productively and critically in performance-making. Debord outlines and introduces the concept of ‘spectacle’ from a Marxist perspective in relation to key interrelated themes including the ‘commodity’, ‘representation’, the ‘image’, ‘capitalism’, and the separation of ‘labour’ from ‘product’ (Debord, 1983). Of particular relevance for aerial work is Debord’s examination of the role ‘spectacle’ plays in relation to consumption, leisure and entertainment. As I detail earlier in this chapter, aerial performance, having emerged from traditional circus, is a genre that has historically engaged with imperialist narratives that also speak of technological, economic and social progress. Such narratives, as I argue, are in conspiratorial dialogue with the covert motivations of the spectacle as defined by Debord; his theory thus provides an especially effective model for considering aerial spectacle and its role in the entertainment industry and, more broadly, in a capitalist society. Debord’s account of spectacle also refers to the ‘spectacularization’ of various aspects of social life: aerial work, as a form that traditionally and inherently engages with the spectacularization of the human body, is considered within this frame. As my analysis in the thesis will demonstrate, while Debord’s theories of spectacle emerged as long ago as the 1960s, they remain pertinent in a post-postmodern society that is seeing development of fast-evolving technological, political and entertainment spectacles on both the macro and micro scale. Kershaw’s theories of ‘spectacles of deconstruction’ and the ‘performative society’ both build on Debord’s arguments regarding spectacle and representation (Kershaw, 2003, 595 & 593). In particular, Kershaw addresses how the notion of ‘theatricalized consumption’ is integral to spectacle and, furthermore, how the theatricalization of the everyday is used to uphold capitalist culture and economics (Kershaw, 2009, 206). Kershaw argues that spectacle in the twenty-first century has taken on new meaning and size, and infiltrating everyday life to an even greater degree than when *The Society of the Spectacle* was first published. For Kershaw, while spectacle and ‘spectacularization’ predominantly operate to reinforce capitalist values, ‘spectacles of

deconstruction' harness aspects of spectacle as a means of enabling social critique (Kershaw, 2003, 595). In this thesis, I argue that the 'spectacle of deconstruction' represents a useful model whereby the spectacular dimension of aerial may be applied critically and in a socially engaged context (Kershaw, 2003, 595). Finally, in this section I examine Laura Mulvey's theorisation of the relationship between spectacle and gendered ways of looking within Hollywood film, and consider how this correlates with ways of looking with regard to the spectacle of aerial performance. Importantly, Mulvey's analysis connects the commodification of the 'woman as spectacle' to broader social perceptions of the female body and gendered identity (Mulvey, 1989, 20). I argue that Mulvey's critique can valuably be applied to live performance and, specifically, to aerial: as I show, the verticality of aerial performance significantly echoes those cinematic effects and strategies which, for Mulvey, problematically enable and encourage the viewer's 'erotic contemplation' (Mulvey, 1989, 19).

### *Spectacle*

The notion of 'spectacle' is a central tenet of Situationist theory, conceived and formalised by Guy Debord in his seminal work *The Society of the Spectacle*. The Situationists were a collective of academics, political theorists and avant-garde artists, formed as an active organisation in 1957 and dissolved in 1972, who radically opposed advanced capitalism in its multiple manifestations and in its effects on economic and social relations. The Situationists, and centrally Debord, implemented and reinstated Marxian critique as a means of analysing the alienation and separation that the capitalist social model imposes. The early to mid-twentieth century witnessed a shift from competitive to consumer capitalism, meaning a move beyond concentration on purely economic growth to emphasise a distinctive social ethos that fostered the production and consumption of commodities. In line with these socioeconomic developments came technological advancements, which contributed in their turn to a

marked increase in the use of media and advertising. Debord argued that it was during this period that the 'economy's domination of social life' began and with it 'an evident degradation of being into *having* - human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed' (Debord, 1983, 10-11, italics in original). Hence, within what Debord termed the 'society of the spectacle', the acquisition of commodities was no longer just an indicator of wealth but one also of personal identity.

For Debord, 'spectacle' is a concept used to recognise and deconstruct two major complex and interrelated manifestations. Firstly, spectacle is regarded as fundamental to the contemporary capitalist system and the means it employs to distract individuals from the privation and alienation caused by that system. Secondly, spectacle is used by Debord to refer to society itself, a society that both endorses and is shaped by that system, the objective of which is the production and consumption of images, commodities, and media, and the dramatization and subversion of real events. As Debord explains:

Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the result and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this real society's unreality. In all of its particular manifestations - news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment - the spectacle represents the dominant *model* of life. (Debord, 1983, 8, italics in original)

Through commercial multimedia forms such as advertising, leisure and entertainment, the spectacle presents a distorted and carefully curated representation of reality. It appears on the surface accurately to reflect or represent 'real' events, when in actuality it offers highly selective mediations with the goal of supporting the agenda of the capitalist system. Debord claims that within the spectacle '*fragmented* views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudo-world* that can only be looked at'

whilst real life is abandoned (Debord, 1983, 7, italics in original). In this way, society becomes superseded by representations of itself and thus society's members are led increasingly to live in accordance with such representations.

### *Separation*

According to Debord, spectacle succeeds in placating and distracting individuals by means of its processes of separation, as well as by submerging society in spectacular imagery and commodities. Separation, Debord argues, 'is the alpha and omega of the spectacle' and is used as a device to both undermine and divide collective social power (Debord, 1983, 13). Within the 'society of the spectacle', the artificial representation that supersedes real life functions to separate individuals from their own lived experience, from their sense of self and from each other. Social relations between people are 'mediated by images' in the spectacular forms of advertising, leisure and entertainment (Debord, 1983, 7). Individuals are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the spectacle, which, in turn, 'keeps them isolated from each other' (Debord, 1983, 16). What *does* unite people '*in their separatedness*' is their shared aspiration to achieve the ambitions of consumption laid out by the spectacle (Debord, 1983, 16, italics in original). Hence, individuals compensate for the alienation they experience through separation by identifying with and consuming the catalogue of narratives, identities and lifestyles offered by the spectacle. The spectacle's separation not only affects interpersonal relations, but also works problematically to detach interrelated social actions and practices from each other. For example, products are separated from the labour invested in their making; objects are stripped of their original symbolic meaning; and time is separated from its direct lived experience. On this last example, Debord describes how 'the spectacle [...] represents a false consciousness of time', meaning that the human experience of time has been replaced by the economic construct of contemporary capitalism (Debord, 1983, 90). Time has become

‘transformed by industry’ and in ‘itself a consumable commodity’ (Debord, 1983, 88). Hence, time is transformed from being an individual and collective experience to a ‘raw material’ used in the manufacturing of products and commodities (1983, 88). In this sense, time becomes not only exchangeable, but something that individuals aspire to acquire. The absurdity of this is that time is, self-evidently, something that humans have always had access to; it is the framework imposed by the spectacle that transforms it into a seemingly finite resource. Commodities and goods increasingly present new ways in which they can support the consumer in ‘saving’ time. Time that is saved by ‘increasing transportation speeds’ or ‘using packaged soup’ can then be reallocated to other consumer activities, such as watching television for ‘three to six hours a day’ (Debord, 1983, 89). In this way, each person’s time is reorganised, compartmentalised and reallocated by means of the apparatus of the spectacle, in order to realise its overarching consumerist objectives. What is more, within this system, the acquisition of more time can become a marker of individual ‘wealth’. Debord observes:

As for the social image of the consumption of time, it is exclusively dominated by leisure time and vacations - moments portrayed, like all spectacular commodities, *at a distance* and desirable by definition. (Debord, 1983, 89, italics in original)

In Debord’s ‘Society of the Spectacle’, time becomes a form of luxury goods and the experience of time a privilege. Social classes and categories are defined not only by the quantity of ‘leisure time’ that they possess, but also by the *kinds* of leisure time they engage with. Hence, ‘spectacular time’ insists on the commodification of original human experiences (Debord, 1983, 88). Individuals are separated not only from an experience of time *not* shaped by the spectacle, but also from each other in terms of the kind of ‘time experiences’ they possess and are able to pursue.

The 'commodity' and the notion of consumption both play a central role in Debord's critique as elements designed and managed by the powerful as a means of controlling, categorizing and profiting from the labour and vulnerabilities of the rest. Debord draws on Marx's notion of the commodity as something which is 'completely cut off from the concerted action of the forces of production' (Debord, 1983, 22). Thus, a commodity's symbolic or cultural value exceeds that of its actual function. Debord states that 'the spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life' and as a result 'commodification is not only visible' but has saturated society to the point that 'we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the world of commodity' (Debord, 1983, 21). Society's immersion in the world of the commodity, and its omnipresent influence, means that not only is commodification a defining force in society but also that everything within society becomes commodifiable: not simply goods or services, but people, experiences, the natural world. In this way, the spectacle inverts 'living values into purely abstract values' (Debord, 1983, 19). Constituent elements of society are stripped of their original meaning through representation and are reimagined in a new spectacular form. These spectacular representations of what was once simply lived ensure continuance of the cycle of production and consumption, simultaneously fuelling the spectacle's own continuous regeneration.

### *Images, Entertainment and the Aerial Spectacle*

The consequence of the image-saturation Debord describes is that social reality becomes mediated by those with the power to shape the spectacle, rather than by those who live its reality (albeit that no one is 'outside' that society and untouched by its manipulative effects). Therefore, representation becomes the primary reference point for an individual's sense of self, aspirations, opportunities, relationships and life expectations. Entertainment, which regularly courts and relies upon spectacle, plays an active role in representing the 'dominant *model* of life' and also in justifying 'the conditions and aims of the existing system' (Debord, 1983, 8, italics in original). Understood from the perspective of Debord's theories,

spectacular entertainment can be seen to offer a distraction from the problems created by capitalism, whilst simultaneously re-enacting the capitalist ethos through demonstrations of human progress, spatial occupation, technological or scientific developments.

Debord's analysis can be applied to live performance forms including dance, circus and theatre; to digital (and explicitly commercial) media, including television, film, advertising and gaming; and, in the twenty-first century, to social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. My research uses Debord's critical model specifically as a means of comprehending the 'glitter of the spectacular distractions' enacted by aerial performance (Debord, 1983, 28). Aerial performance, recalling Debord's account of the development of spectacle, has through its history in traditional and contemporary circus recurrently served to privilege and perpetuate dominant western ideologies and narratives of progress. A recent example of aerial performance as implicit social propaganda is in the 2012 London Olympics opening ceremony, entitled 'Isles of Wonder', which included a scene where a fleet of thirty 'Mary Poppins' were flown into the stadium to defeat the character 'Lord Voldemort', famous from J.K.Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. The ceremony re-enacted a series of events from British history, which were then interwoven with fictitious narratives, the result being a specularized, theatricalized, mythologized and skillfully edited story of British history and 'Britishness'. The event epitomized Debord's statement that 'the *subject* of history [...] can only be the self-production of the living' within which 'living people becoming masters and possessors of their own historical world and of their own *fully conscious adventures*' (Debord, 1983, 37). Here, the Olympics Event conveyed a version of Britain's history that celebrated its perceived successes but chose not to mention how this might have come at the expense of other nations. The role of aerial work in this context presented humans with "inhuman" physical skills in the form of fictional characters, who acted out the 'socio-political viewpoints' of the British nation state 'in a *full, totally free manner*' (Debord, 1983, 29). Understood through Debord's

model of the spectacle, the effect of this mediation is to promote the advantages of the capitalist and imperialist system, while effectively ‘disappearing’ its problems. The dazzlement produced by aerial spectacle, often in the form of complex tricks and virtuosic displays, also serves as justification for the dominant capitalist ideology: that hard work is rewarded by exceptional human progress. Yet, since the artist - at least, in the context of traditional aerial practice - is obliged to hide the labour of their performance, they are at the same time effectively ‘separated’ from it. This estrangement of the artist’s performance from the physical training invested in its production reflects what Debord describes as ‘the general separation of worker and product’ (Debord, 1983, 14). Additionally, separation is significantly evident in the gap - literal and metaphorical - between performer and spectator. The aerialist, positioned far above the watching audience, may be perceived as ‘superhuman’ by means of their exceptional physical ability, marking them out as unlike and distant from ‘ordinary’ society. This separation, I argue, is also reinforced by traditional circus narratives of ‘freedom’ that position the circus community as outside the norms of society.

### *Spectacles of Deconstruction and the Performative Society*

In my critical analysis of aerial performance, as well as in my creative practice, I also apply the work of theatre scholar Baz Kershaw, with particular reference to his proposal for ‘spectacles of deconstruction’ (Kershaw, 2003, 595). In applying Kershaw’s model, I draw principally on two key articles, ‘Dramas of the Performative Society: Theatre at the End of its Tether’ (2001) and ‘Curiosity or Contempt: On Spectacle, the Human, and Activism’ (2003), in both of which Kershaw develops this proposal and explores its implications. ‘Spectacles of deconstruction’ are, in Kershaw’s words, ‘spectacles that displace the nature of the real’ and function by creating performative paradoxes, as a means of undermining, interrupting and drawing attention to both the ‘performative society’ and the mass production of theatrical performance itself (Kershaw, 2001, 206; Kershaw, 2003, 595). Kershaw’s account of spectacle builds

explicitly on Debord, but moves beyond this to propose that subjects are ‘constituted through spectacle’ within what Kershaw labels the ‘performative society’ (Kershaw, 2003, 595 & 593). Kershaw argues that ‘performative societies’ are found ‘where democracy and capitalism meet’; hence, ‘how individuals fare in the competition between lifestyles or the struggle to accumulate depends crucially on their own performance’ (Kershaw, 2001, 206). This kind of society measures individual achievement in conjunction with economic prosperity and in doing so overlooks social privileges such as those relating to race, class, gender and sexuality. Kershaw’s depiction of the performative society predominantly associates ‘theatricalized consumption’ with human progress (Kershaw, 2001, 206). Within the performative society, the theatricalization of the everyday and everyday tasks is employed as a means of sustaining dominant capitalist ideologies and economic systems (2003, 593). In this way, the identity and value of the human subject is determined on the basis of one’s ‘performance’. It is this continuously re-enacted cultural performance that constitutes what Kershaw and Debord both refer to as ‘spectacle’. Since Debord published *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967 the ‘human sense of scale’ has, as Kershaw emphasises, radically metamorphosized (2003, 596). Spectacle, which was in the mid twentieth-century predominantly associated with large and impressive displays, has, through later twentieth and twenty-first century processes of globalization, become more fluid and also paradoxically more ‘shrunk’, such that it is able to permeate different aspects of everyday life on an increasingly micro-level. Kershaw argues that this process was ‘hurtled into hyperdrive’ by the ‘full force of the digital revolution’ (Kershaw, 2003, 604).

He adds:

Such were the conditions needed to finally uncouple spectacle from the large-scale, to miniaturize spectacle so that it was no longer primarily associated with public events and spaces, but in a sense also became personalized - accessible, for example, at the click of a mouse. (Kershaw, 2003, 604)

Hence, the ‘cultural performance’ of spectacle became not only miniaturized but multiplied and distributed on a global scale (2003, 592). In contemporary western society, in all aspects of life, we are confronted with impressive displays to the point where these become the norm. For example, screens, in correlation with technological advancements and as a key device employed within consumer capitalism, have shrunk over time, perfectly exemplifying the ‘miniaturization of spectacle’ (2003, 596). This in turn has allowed the impact of spectacle to be registered ever more widely and minutely, as the miniaturized concentration makes it possible to penetrate increasingly smaller space and further into everyday life. The same process has enabled ideas of performativity to permeate society to an even greater degree, such that formerly benign activities - such as informal socializing and eating - are influenced. The result of all this is a society whose every aspect is arguably overtaken by a theatricalized version of itself, resulting in powerful alienation of its subjects both from themselves and each other.

Kershaw’s enquiry in both articles is concerned with how performance and theatre can interact with and respond to a society where performance and spectacle are its defining factors. He discusses the challenges of performance-making within a spectacular ‘performative society’, in which the narratives of performances are themselves ‘prone to acute and continual crisis as the distinctions between image and belief, illusion and reality, stage and society begin to collapse’ (Kershaw, 2001, 208). If the social conception of the world is dominated by the theatricalization of all public and private space, this trend is necessarily reflected in contemporary theatre and performance-making. However, Kershaw argues further that, as society turns ever more performative and dramatic in multifarious ways, theatre and performance as art forms become increasingly unable to compete, exposed as ‘hopelessly quaint and inadequate’, especially when contrasted with digital media whose communicative reach is more widely pervasive (Kershaw, 2001, 208). With this in mind, Kershaw encourages a reconsideration of the role of (the

deconstructive) spectacle within a theatrical context as a form able to contend with, and potentially also deconstruct, the spectacularity of the performative society (2003, 593). Whilst he criticises the ways in which spectacle in theatre and performance has typically been used, Kershaw nevertheless proposes that spectacle constitutes a ‘fabulously flexible force for change’ that has considerable implications and opportunities for contemporary activism (Kershaw, 2003, 593).

Spectacle has traditionally been, and is still, associated with what is considered to be ‘low’ art and culture, for instance with the diverse displays of reality television, pornography, popular music, circus and burlesque (for more on this, see Chapter 3 on neoburlesque versus underground burlesque). Arguments against ‘low’ spectacular entertainment of this kind have contended that these forms encourage passive consumption and escapism, as well as reinforcing consumerist values without critique. However, Kershaw argues that the ‘WOW! factor’ of spectacle brings about extreme responses and, at its best, is able to harness that force to engage with fundamental aspects of the human condition, ‘dealing directly with extremities of power: gods, monarchy, regicide, war, terrorism, catastrophe, apocalypse now’ (Kershaw, 2003, 592). In this way, such extremities have the capacity to go beyond the representation central to the society of the spectacle, or performative society, and are able to connect social subjects with the core aspects of human existence. Whether or not this process is effective in challenging the spectacular representations that have infiltrated the performative society depends on their context and cultural framework. However, Kershaw contends that if the performative society is fundamentally characterised by spectacle, then spectacle could itself offer the key to critical deconstruction: the very ‘paradoxes of spectacle’, he argues, suggest that ‘common humanity might be fleetingly found in spectacular processes’ (Kershaw, 2003, 595). It is such paradoxes that characterize Kershaw’s complex model of the deconstructive spectacle and enable it to simultaneously engage with both spectacular and critical models of performance-making.

To function effectively, 'spectacles of deconstruction' require from makers and audiences what Kershaw describes as 'an especially reflexive take' on what it is to be '*commonly* human in the contemporary world' (Kershaw, 2003, 595). Such models present the 'death' of the human subject, as constituted through the performative society, and in doing so offer an alternative lens with which to view the human subject which takes into account human flaws, fragility and fallibility (2003, 606). The deconstructive spectacle encompasses and foregrounds 'one of the key paradoxes of spectacle' in that 'it deals with the human in inhuman ways' (Kershaw, 2003, 594). For example, the status or scale of the human subject may be understood through its comparison to other phenomena different from itself. The deconstructive spectacle compares the core essence of what it is to be human to the role of the human subject within the performative society, and through this juxtaposition presents a deconstruction of both the human *and* the spectacle which subsumes it. Hence, in 'spectacles of deconstruction', the spectacle is presented and at the same time, deconstructed, creating an instance where 'fiction and reality are [...] forced to collide' (Kershaw, 2003, 599). Unlike spectacles that do not expose and critique their mechanisms in this way, deconstructive spectacles consciously resist the passive consumption of narratives, ideas or hierarchies that dictate social life and culture within the performative society. The juxtapositions that underpin this model are able to demonstrate the complex intermingling of reality and representation which characterizes contemporary society, in addition to encompassing conflicting and contradicting ideas and ethics. Rather than offering a singular, linear critique of social issues, the juxtapositions inherent in the deconstructive spectacle present multiple intertwining narratives, in the process drawing attention to the gap between reality and representation.

One of the key tactics fostered by deconstructive spectacles, Kershaw argues, is the ‘close connection between spectacle and disaster’ (Kershaw, 2003, 596). On the potency of disaster, or of its threat, he observes:

disaster unexpectedly unleashes extreme powers that rupture a world we would prefer to keep wholly intact, suddenly splitting open normality to expose its utter instability. It achieves this by threatening always to eliminate the human, to reduce us to total insignificance in the grand scheme or chaos of things. (Kershaw, 2003, 596)

The instability of disaster proves to be a particularly useful mechanism in the context of this argument, as it presents an unpredictable force that cannot be fully controlled or commodified. Disaster is closely related to failure, something that contradicts spectacular capitalist narratives of human and social progress. Technology, as one of the many apparatuses employed by spectacle, has always worked as a means of superseding, competing with or extending the capabilities of the human, either in actuality or through representation. The power of disaster, natural or otherwise, lies in its ability to overpower or overrule technology, proving that nothing is invincible. This dynamic is harnessed by Kershaw’s deconstructive spectacles, used to return to and re-emphasise real human limitations and abilities.

The concept of ‘spectacles of deconstruction’ has proved critically productive in my analysis of aerial and likewise in my creative aerial practice. Since deconstructive spectacles deal overtly with spectacle, and therefore with virtuosity, they are also potentially able to encompass the spectacle of aerial work; I contend therefore that performance works that utilize the notion of the deconstructive spectacle are able to recognise and respond to cultural texts and their inherent myths and narratives. Importantly, the deconstructive spectacle model offers a means of positively exploiting the spectacular dimensions of

aerial, whilst critiquing, contending or undermining the historical, social and political associations of the form. Further, the deconstructive spectacle recognises the performance work as a fabric of signs, and considers how these signs operate together to create meaning and challenge meaning inherent within mass culture. Kershaw describes this process as the ‘destabilization of signification’, the practice of undermining cultural signs (Kershaw, 2003, 610). Deconstructive spectacles work not only to undermine cultural signs, but also to reconfigure their arrangement and interrelations. The efficacy of ‘spectacles of deconstruction’ is determined in part by the context of presentation; this element has been important in my own research, when considering the context within which aerial work is made and shown.

Additionally, Kershaw’s theoretical model provides a framework through which we might understand how to humanise the seemingly ‘inhuman’ or ‘superhuman’ aerial body, and how to recognise and attend to the power structures that encourage its dehumanization (Kershaw, 2003). In this way, I argue that deconstructive spectacle constitutes a strategy for ‘using fire to fight fire’ or, in this case, using spectacle to deconstruct spectacle.

### *Gendered Spectacle*

The potential relationship between spectacle and gendered ways of looking has been widely explored, including by scholars Rebecca Schneider and Kay Siebler, and, some decades earlier, by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey. All three reflect on the ways in which the ‘commodified’ female body is constructed and presented in performance, how performance works to encourage different modes of looking from the spectator, and how such processes might be interrogated. Schneider’s influential study *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997) examines in detail works of performance art that, the author argues, pose a challenge to, or disrupt, ideologically damaging constructions of female sexuality. In dialogue with Debord’s spectacular society, Schneider proposes that ‘Western civilization is in thrall to a “Real” we are acculturated to accept’ (Schneider, 1997, 6). Within the “Real”, the female body has

become an ‘emblem of representational fantasy’ which is seen ‘everywhere’ (Schneider, 1997, 6). Schneider’s concern is to explore the nature and process of this commodification and demonstrate the ‘impossibility of women as “real” within the representational premises of commodity capitalism’ (Schneider, 1997, 7). Kay Siebler’s focus is the performing female body in the context of burlesque: in a 2015 study, she contrasts ‘neo-burlesque’, which in her view perpetuates problematic structures of commodification of the kind also identified by Schneider, with ‘underground burlesque’, which Siebler proposes works to complicate and potentially undermine these. Siebler’s primary concern, then, is to deconstruct the means by which the female subject in performance becomes an object of ‘sexual desire’, vulnerable to being replicated, distributed and consumed (Siebler, 2015, 566). The problematic commodification of the female body, female sexuality, and the undermining of women’s agency, are questions addressed some decades earlier by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay ‘Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema’ (1975). Here, Mulvey persuasively sets out not only the potential relationship between spectacle and gendered ways of looking, but also the effects of the separation between the viewer and the object of the gaze, reinforced by the cinema screen. As I shall show, while Mulvey’s analysis deals with film, as opposed to live performance, her arguments are significantly productive for an understanding of aerial. The aerial performer is separated from the watching audience to a far greater extent than is usual in the dramatic theatre: this literal distance, coupled with the ‘glamour’ traditionally associated with aerial form, suggests connections if not absolute parallels with the Hollywood screen actresses whose objectification Mulvey describes. Applying Mulvey in my own analysis is valuable, therefore, both for the distinctive illumination her work lends to aerial and for the ways in which combining perspectives from screen and stage help to show how commodification strategies function across media and what means might be employed to resist these.

In 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema' Mulvey adopts psychoanalytic approaches, namely Sigmund Freud's theories on scopophilia (meaning sexual pleasure or gratification derived from voyeurism) and Jacques Lacan's notion of the 'mirror stage' and its relationship to ego, in order to illustrate how the patriarchal ethos underpinning western society impacts upon the ways in which films - in her analysis, predominantly Hollywood films - are made and viewed. Mulvey states that her essay 'takes as its starting point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle' (Mulvey, 1989, 14). Crucially for her argument, she introduces the notion of the 'woman as spectacle' and as the 'sexual object [...] leit-motif of erotic spectacle', which 'plays to and signifies male desire' (Mulvey, 1989, 20 & 19). Mulvey's approach to spectacle and its relationship to gendered power has made a vital contribution to feminist scholarship and wider academic theory with regard to the ways in which we might understand, critique and ultimately deconstruct the patriarchal lens. Mulvey's concept of the 'woman as spectacle' intersects with Debord's idea of the spectacle as commodity, as discussed earlier in this chapter, in that it therefore offers the image of the woman as both consumable and reproducible (Mulvey, 1998, 20). She argues that the 'the beauty of the woman as object' lies in her construction as a 'perfect product, whose body is the [...] direct recipient of the spectator's look' (Mulvey, 1989, 22). In this way the female figure becomes a canvas upon which the spectator's desire can be projected. By reproducing, representing and claiming ownership of female sexuality and aesthetics, Mulvey argues, patriarchal society cultivates a culture of control over women. While Mulvey deals explicitly with film, I argue that her analysis proves relevant and productive when applied in the context of gender and spectacle in visual performance more broadly. In Chapters Three and Five of this thesis, I apply Mulvey's theory within an analysis of spectacle-based works by four female solo artists and also with reference to my own performance practice. I show that her arguments are particularly pertinent to the ways in which spectacle-based performance, and in particular aerial work, is frequently staged. In aerial performance, the physical

distance imposed by the height of the performer works to separate them from the audience in a way that echoes (although does not replicate) the separation produced by the film medium. Further, the level of specialist training that lies behind much if not all spectacular performance, such as circus or magic, functions to reduce the possibility of human failure through repetition: the ability to reproduce a live trick 'perfectly' each time recalls the rewinding or replaying of a sequence on film. In a book she wrote sometime later, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, Mulvey refers to 'cinema, as a medium of spectacle': likewise, my own research represents aerial performance as, historically, a medium and an instrument of spectacle, in the way that it has reenacted ideas of dominance and invited visual consumption (Mulvey, 2006, 164). Although aerial performance and film are evidently dissimilar mediums, there are notable echoes in the ways in which each has historically - in Hollywood movies on the one hand and in traditional circus on the other - presented and constructed the female body. There is, I propose, a tangible connection between Mulvey's 'woman' on film, as bearer of the spectator's gaze, and the female aerialist: both are eroticized and removed; both are denied the means of influencing narrative, or communicating agency.

Mulvey argues of Hollywood film that male protagonists hold the power within the narrative trajectory, with regard to plot line and in their relationship to the women on screen. She states that 'the man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise the extradiegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle' (Mulvey, 1989, 20). She goes on to propose that women's roles are typically centred around the creation of moments of beauty, sensuality, sexuality or in essence, visual pleasure. She writes:

The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative. (Mulvey, 1989, 19)

Within the genre of aerial performance, by contrast, the female aerialists' role as provider of spectacle is not necessarily negotiated by a male protagonist (albeit that in traditional circus all circus acts were introduced by the historically male ringmaster). Nonetheless, the spectacular performances of female aerial artists is still controlled or constrained by the social and production context in which it is staged, rarely challenging the consumerist and patriarchal ideologies that significantly inform this. Indeed, as I argue, traditional aerial performance rather operates to reinforce the gender hierarchies already manifest within society, where the female body is appropriated as a source of 'visual pleasure' for the spectator; moreover, a disproportionate number of women in the aerial industry mean it is predominantly female aerialists who become a thing 'to-be-looked-at'. Furthermore, as I argue throughout the thesis, when aerial is employed in a theatrical context it is only rarely used to drive the narrative arc or story. More often than not, the insertion of aerial elements in theatre productions appear to provide, in the words of Mulvey, a moment of 'erotic contemplation', where the theatrical narrative pauses 'outside of linear time' and the spectator is encouraged to take full pleasure in the process of watching the performer (Mulvey, 1989, 22). There are notable exceptions to this, however, and I explore selected examples of challenging, critically purposeful aerial practice in later chapters. In such cases, the aerial performer acquires a renewed sense of agency, as their sole purpose is not only to provide a source of 'visual pleasure' for the spectator but also to contribute to the overall cohesion and meaning of a theatrical narrative.

Where my own field of aerial performance, and aerial in theatre, clearly departs from or sits outside Mulvey's film-based analysis is that live performance is unfixed: regardless of the honed skill levels of the performer, what happens on stage is always subject to change. This unfixedness suggests an opportunity to foster performer agency; likewise, live performance makes it possible to return the gaze and to respond to the audience in real time. Mulvey acknowledges that cinema is different in its 'voyeuristic potential' from forms of live performance such as 'strip-tease, theatre, shows etc' (Mulvey, 1989, 25). She suggests that female bodies in particular are 'stylised and fragmented by close-ups' in a way that cannot be replicated by live performance (Mulvey, 1989, 22). For Mulvey, 'cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire' (Mulvey, 1989, 25). My own analysis embraces the distinct opportunities and freedoms that live performance allows, but insists that the live art form - and aerial in particular - is not exempt from structures of illusion production that result in objectifying and dehumanising the female subject. The tricks and physical prowess offered by the female aerialist offer a replacement for camera angles, which revolve 'around the perception of the subject' in the way that they draw the spectator's eye to different parts of the body (Mulvey, 1989, 26). What is more, the verticality of aerial work plays with the proximity of the performer to the audience, mimicking cinematic tactics, which negotiate and provoke ideas of eroticism, desire and 'unreachableness'.

In 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema', Mulvey introduced the now notorious term 'male gaze' to describe the perception of the woman on screen as sexual object and source of 'visual pleasure' for the male spectator. For Mulvey, 'the determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly'; correspondingly, the 'female figure' becomes a vessel or canvas which can be manipulated to serve the needs of the spectator (Mulvey, 1989, 19). According to Mulvey, the 'male gaze' is not only a means of looking but also controlling and dehumanising the female subject. Mulvey's essay is rightly considered seminal, yet since 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema' was published, there

has been significant criticism of its analysis and assumptions. A key concern has been with the relative rigidity of her model, particularly its inability to acknowledge other modes of looking and types of difference that might affect the ways in which staged power relations are read. The decades following publication of Mulvey's essay have seen scholarship emerge that models the gaze differently, proposing for instance the 'female gaze', the 'oppositional gaze', the 'queer gaze' and the 'imperial gaze', which collectively allow more nuanced understanding of power relations - of race, sexuality, class and ethnicity - than originally outlined by Mulvey. The 'female gaze' describes the way of looking which might be adopted by a female spectator or film maker and has been written about by feminist scholars Zoe Dirse and Paula Marantz Cohen in essays respectively titled 'Gender in Cinematography: Female Gaze (Eye) behind the Camera' (2013) and 'What Have Clothes Got to Do With it? Romantic Comedy and the Female Gaze' (2010). The 'oppositional gaze' was coined and interrogated by feminist scholar bell hooks in her 1992 essay collection *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (hooks, 2014, 115). hooks argued that feminist film scholarship had omitted black female spectatorship, which disempowered and excluded black females from participating in critical discussions regarding film, gender and power relations. Hence, hooks proposed the 'oppositional gaze' as a way for black female spectators to interpret film with a renewed sense of agency that meant they did not have to identify with either the male gaze or with the (white) female gaze (hooks, 2014, 115). Thus, while Mulvey's model of the 'male gaze' has significantly informed my critical and creative research, inspiring useful ways of understanding and perceiving the female body in space, it does so by drawing attention to a certain kind of 'looking' within what is always a much broader and more complex spectrum of spectatorship. My own creative practice not only acknowledges but embraces different forms of spectatorship, particularly in relation to sexuality and mental health. Yet despite its inevitable simplifications, Mulvey's model of the 'male gaze' offers a useful basis from which to contextualise the objectification of women and the commodification of female sexuality. Combined with the analyses of Debord and Kershaw, Mulvey's theory has enabled a useful

standpoint from which to develop a critique of female representation in aerial work and other spectacular performance. ‘Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema’ may have been published in 1975, but for women in the twenty-first century the question of ownership is as pertinent as ever.

### *Theory in Combination*

The theories of Debord, Kershaw and Mulvey intersect, I propose, providing a way of comprehending the social, political and historical implications of aerial spectacle and the ‘spectacularization’ of society as a whole. Collectively, their analyses implicitly demonstrate that aerial spectacle is inseparable from ideas pertaining to human progress, consumption, capitalism, commodification, gaze, labour and gender, but equally suggest that there are strategies for addressing such themes *through* spectacle within a critical performance-making context. Debord’s arguments expose the phenomenon of spectacularization and the subsequent socio-political repercussions on individuals, societal relations and sense of self. ‘Spectacle’ is seen to enact a form of social control which not only mediates interpersonal relations but also distracts from the oppression it enforces. Debord’s analysis can thus be used to unpick how the aerial spectacle acts both in dialogue with, and as part of, the spectacularization of society. The connection Kershaw draws between the ‘performative society’ and ‘theatricalized consumption’ also helps to reveal how the aerial spectacle contributes to and promotes the continuation of spectacularized society, whereby individual value is determined by performance (2003, 593). Debord’s analysis, applied to aerial, exposes the performance spectacle as a product manufactured for consumption and separated from the labour invested in its making; that critique also encourages reconsideration of aerial’s historical and potential signification, not least in terms of how this form portrays the abilities and limitations of the human subject. The traditional circus promoted the aerial artist as a figure of tremendous physical prowess and almost superhuman ability; popular circus today still largely upholds this image of glamour and power. By the same means, the society of the spectacle, according to Debord, cultivates an image (or collection

of images) of society in which high achievement and ‘success’ are comprehensively privileged. The aerial artist is a literal ‘high achiever’, glorified in their ability to overcome human fallibility; likewise, fallibility and failure are themes not just excluded from but opposed by the narratives and images of capitalist spectacle.

Mulvey’s critique of the gendered social hierarchies implicit in spectacle assists understanding of the ways in which aerial spectacle is read and utilized within a patriarchal-dominant society. Mulvey’s analysis additionally connects the notion of the female subject-for-consumption with Debord’s reading of spectacle and consumption. In combination, their analyses help to expose the strategies employed by capitalism for co-opting and controlling women and the extent to which such strategies become normalized and effectively invisible. However, in contrast to Debord and Mulvey, Kershaw’s model of the deconstructive spectacle offers hope, helping not just to identify the narratives attached to aerial work but to show how these might be positively employed as a means of revealing ideological value systems and offering critique and commentary. At its best, the deconstructive spectacle can draw attention to the commodification, separation and consumption of spectacular society, whilst also critiquing and deliberately undermining this. As Kershaw proposes, and as my application of his argument seeks to model, deconstructive spectacular performance allows audiences to see the mechanisms underpinning spectacle, the role it plays within the ‘performative society’, and the values it covertly endorses (2003, 593). Staged ‘deconstructively’, the spectacular form of aerial, which relies on verticality, strength and balance, can thus operate to draw attention to problematic social hierarchies, human fallibilities and imbalances of power. Aerial work, as I show, is especially able to engage with ideas around perfection, commodification, representation and objectification, issues identified in association with spectacle by Mulvey and by Debord. In this way, the model of the deconstructive spectacle, whilst undeniably challenging to realise in practice (as later chapters show), represents a critical and creative way to

re-engage with the structures, images, narratives, associations and expectations attached to aerial performance.

### Critical Performance and Virtuoso Spectacle

The history of circus and its associations with mass entertainment, glamour, labour and narratives of freedom, still colour and, I argue, restrict the potential of contemporary circus practice and the performance of circus-related disciplines. The emphasis on spectacular form and virtuosity has meant that circus performance has largely been excluded from what are generally considered as more critically engaged genres such as contemporary theatre, live art or dance. By critically engaged performance, I mean performance that is both outwardly and internally reflective, and that strives in its thematic content to challenge existing and pre-existing social hierarchies, structures and models. At its best, such performance presents also different modes of experimentation, and complex aesthetic and conceptual models, blending creativity with intellectual rigour. The agenda of critically engaged practice and the application of the aesthetic forms employed will primarily operate to support an underlying concept, rather than to display the virtuosity of performers or makers for its own sake. In this context, demonstration of virtuosity or additional skills is arguably superfluous to a work unless this supports or reflects its content; further, such elements potentially endanger both the clarity and integrity of a work's concept by overshadowing it and becoming the audience's focus. The reality and the aura of technical mastery may also carry risks for the performer. Lievens argues that circus artists have 'actually come to believe' the 'self-devised myth that says that physical virtuosity is an expression of (artistic and political) freedom', suggesting that aerial performers, by means of their access to extraordinary spatial freedoms, may feel entitled to other privileges too (Lievens, 2017). The perpetuated myth of freedom presents circus as an ideal utopia, which 'ordinary people' can only dreamingly aspire to. In doing this, it widens the gap between performer and audience, instead of fostering the bond between performance and society. Hence,

for Lievens, ‘it is almost impossible to create subversive work’ whilst the circus genre continues to believe that it is a ‘minority practice’ that acts ‘in opposition to a broader, “unfree” society’ (Lievens, 2017). Furthermore, by continuously fostering the same narratives of ‘freedom’, the circus genre as a whole restricts its own development as skills such as critical thinking, and interdisciplinary approaches to performance-making, become neglected or outweighed by the emphasis on purely physical training. Yet in common with any sort of physical skill, critical thinking and engagement are skills to be trained, repeated and tested if these are to improve and evolve, and if they are to have a meaningful role within the devising process. As the development of contemporary practice-based research has demonstrated, critical thinking and movement-based practice are not mutually exclusive, and can in fact be synergistic. Such thinking is not necessarily an exclusively cerebral process, as Phillip Zarrilli has argued; for Zarrilli, physical practice is potentially an ‘embodied doing’ within which ‘personal, social, ritual, aesthetic, political, and/or cosmological “realities” are created’ and exposed (Zarrilli, 2014, 34-45). Hence, by embodying experiences one potentially uncovers a variety of new connections across and in between physical and cerebral practices. However, the introduction into performance of elaborate demonstrations of formal physical skill, wholly disconnected from thematic or other ‘content’, can interrupt and fragment a work’s trajectory, narrative or concept. In circus ‘circles’, artists and makers regularly complain about performance projects which appear to be trying to ‘shoehorn’ spectacular circus choreography into a dramatic narrative or more conventionally theatrical form. This situation bears comparison with a different performance problem, where productions or artistic works have been embedded with complex ‘hidden’ meanings, or are seemingly so laden with ‘cerebral virtuosity’, that this outweighs other aspects of the experience and frustrates audience engagement; by the same means, if a performance becomes highly physically virtuosic, it risks audiences becoming disconnected from the humanity of the performer. Hence, extreme displays of physical *or* cerebral virtuosity potentially widens the gap between performer and spectator, between artist and audience. This is not to say that virtuosity is antithetical to critical

engagement and performance efficacy, but rather that its use is most productive when it is part of, rather than separated from, a work's central concept. However, in circus schools and training institutions today, the focus is largely on acquisition of physical technique rather than on the potential of circus as a mode of performance: circus artists learn and train an embodied, biomechanical language, within which ideas of weight, gravity, velocity, verticality, inertia, acceleration and power are embedded (Dumont, 18). The emphasis is thus on perfecting this formal language, enabling the performer to master and 'speak' it fluently and consistently. In her instructional book *Verticality, Weight and Gravity: reflections on the concepts of verticality, weight and gravity in circus arts*, dancer and scholar Agathe Dumont explains that circus artists are continuously negotiating 'the centre of gravity':

When you're standing still, in the upright position (on your feet, both arms along the side of the body), the body's centre of gravity is approximately located between the second and third sacral vertebrae. As soon as you move a segment, the centre of gravity shifts because the masses are no longer distributed in the same way. The centre of gravity moves and is not necessarily located inside the body (Dumont, 2016)

A fundamental aspect to circus artists' training is learning how to negotiate this shifting centre of gravity. They learn how, within this theoretical framework, 'playing with the organisation of the body's segments' can change a body's trajectory in space (Dumont, 2016). What is now referred to as the 'technique' for a particular discipline, such as aerial rope or flying trapeze, is a body of tried and tested physical languages developed in response to an evolving understanding of the body's possibilities and limits in relation to gravity and space. While circus professionals and coaches would argue that the biomechanical fundamentals have remained the same, developments in techniques for different circus disciplines have

led to admittedly exciting breakthroughs in terms of what is considered to be physically possible. For example, the explosion of dynamic aerial rope work that has occurred over the past ten years has instigated new repertoire and ways of perceiving the body in space and in relation to the equipment. However, the institutionalisation and development of physical technique within circus disciplines has also further entrenched ideas of what circus performance looks like and ‘should’ offer audiences. The focus and end goal of circus training techniques, is, for the most part, to be able to perform a movement vocabulary premised on the virtuosic body. Importance is placed on the ability of artists to perform certain tricks, with these as a benchmark for their technical ability and worth. Consequently, circus movement vocabularies have been constrained by these demands, which in turn dictates what is ‘said’ by circus performance works, inhibiting the genre and its capacity for critical discourse.

The concept of virtuosity in performance has been examined by practitioners beyond circus and also within postmodern scholarship, often in reference to its promotion of egotism and creation of empty or ‘meaningless’ spectacles. Virtuosity goes hand-in-hand with spectacle; the mastery of skill, whether physical, technological, architectural or other, creates images which in turn form the basis for impressive and arresting displays. It is in this way that the virtuosic subject – here, the circus or aerial performer - forms spectacle. As discussed earlier, Debord argues that spectacles, which saturate western capitalist culture, have become mediators in societal relations and are not ‘a mere decoration added to the real world’ but rather are at ‘the very heart of this real society's unreality’ (Debord, 1983, 8). While circus performances could arguably be regarded as ‘decorative’, in Debord’s terms, rather than societally fundamental, they nonetheless reflect structural models for western economic and social organisation. The ambition of circus performance is both to create spectacle and to outdo other spectacles, such as technological spectacles, natural spectacles (for example waterfalls or landscapes) and architectural spectacles. In many ways, the circus industry is driven by the same ideals and myths of human progress

that also propel technological advancements. Contemporary society continues to test not only the limits of technological intelligence but also the relationship between humans and technology. Circus performance that relies on physical equipment – as in the case of aerial work - capitalises on this relationship, extending human physical capabilities via the use of technology. By these means, circus performance presents the human body as a heightened and accelerated version of what is popularly considered to be its ‘natural’ state. The concept of the ‘natural’ or daily body is something that shifts in relation to socio-economic and environmental changes, meaning that it is unfixed and a product of its surroundings. Here, however, the ‘natural’ body is also the pedestrian body, which conducts functional and economical movement in order to complete physical tasks. The pedestrian body is the effective opposite of the virtuosic body, since the latter is excessive rather than economical. Lievens argues that ‘the circus body is not a natural body, but a highly-trained and technological one’, a view supported by recognition that the process of training circus artists requires a degree of bodily programming and fine tuning, much as with a machine or technological device (Lievens, 2017). It has become the norm for circus makers to be continuously caught up in a cycle of bettering physical craft and pushing the limits of the human body. There is a culture in circus-making and training to strive to ‘outdo’, ‘improve’ or ‘adapt’ spectacles performed other circus artists. The sharing of choreography and tricks on social media platforms, such as Instagram or Facebook, has mobilised this further. The demonstration of one’s virtuosity becomes a process of self-imaging whereby the performer constructs a highly skilled or masterful version, or spectacle, of themselves. As with corporate advertising strategies, virtuosity and therefore spectacle within circus performance becomes a form of self-promotion, which also becomes something for other members of society to admire or aspire to. Hence, being highly skilled and importantly, being able to demonstrate that skill, increases one’s personal value. In this manner, the circus artist and their work has in Marxist terms ‘exchange value’, becoming a commodity within the greater economic market (Marx, 1993). Lievens asserts that ‘virtuosity is nothing more than the vainly striving human being “at work”’

(Lievens, 2015). Whilst aerial work continues to foreground virtuosity as its primary theme, without any self-critique or context, its modes, ideas and themes of communication will be limited to those relating to the dominant modes of capitalist economic production. While arguably no form of performance escapes commodification altogether, some kinds of performance may be more easily commodified than others. Debord argues that the use of spectacle is intrinsically linked to 'commodity production' (Debord, 1983, 19). If we apply that principle to the circus genre, it follows that if circus disciplines, including aerial, are to become more critically engaged and less commodifiable, then they will need to reconsider the use of spectacle and consequently, of virtuosity. This in turn requires circus makers to consider the manner in which they are, often unknowingly, asserting ideas of 'supremacy and dominance' in the content and form of their work (Lievens, 2015). Lievens stresses the importance of understanding the 'relationship of the virtuoso body to objects that are external to it', in the circus context meaning aerial apparatus (such as rope, silks, trapeze), juggling balls, teeterboard, the floor and so forth (Lievens, 2015). In this relationship, the virtuoso performer traditionally demonstrates their dominion over or mastery of the object; the more skilful the performer, the greater the power they appear to wield. The values of freedom associated with circus are by this logic in actuality a 'freedom' born out of domination and rule. In this way, the virtuosic body frequently becomes about conquering, and continues metaphorically to re-enact in a changed context the history of colonial rule associated with circus. If circus is to be revolutionised as a critical performance genre able to engage with social, historical and political issues, then the use and function of virtuosity requires interrogation and reappropriation.

Aerial performance, as a genre born out of circus, has yet to undergo a phase in its history whereby established techniques for physical performance and training are rejected in order to make way for new choreographic practices. Although, there have been shifts in the way that contemporary circus, *cirque nouveaux* and circus-theatre utilize theatrical narrative, and mediate the relationship between form and

content, the aims and objectives of the choreographic material used in aerial performance have I argue not changed significantly over the past century. Aerial performance traditionally comprises a number of different disciplines, including flying trapeze, static trapeze, Spanish web, roman rings, lyra hoop and corde lisse; in the late twentieth century, apparatus such as silks or fabric also came to be associated with aerial practice. Despite primarily developing and emerging through traditional circus, aerial work, alongside other circus acts, also appeared in vaudeville and other popular entertainment contexts throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For Assael, ‘the circus ring was a key site for mocking the social hierarchy and turning it upside down, at least temporarily’ (Assael, 2004, 85). However, with many circus performers, such as clowns, the consciously ‘low status’ of their act reinforced their low status in society (2004). Aerialists, by contrast, had a high status in the circus and were associated with fantasies of liberation, perceived as unshackled from the weight of social and scientific ruling, as Stoddart describes: ‘Of all circus figures aerialists (of all sorts) have been charged with inspiring the noblest and even transcendent of human achievement’, with ‘the body of the aerialist frequently [operating] as a sign for the circus as a whole’ (Stoddart, 2000, 7). Stoddart’s claim perhaps explains why modern aerial performance, even when presented outside the context of traditional circus, remains perceptually framed by the associations attached to circus history. Amongst circus artists, aerialists take perhaps the greatest physical risks and this, coupled with their physical removal from other performers and from the audience, may seem to render them literally and metaphorically ‘inaccessible’. This distance, for the contemporary aerialist who seeks to make critically engaged practice, is a problem it is necessary to surmount.

In order for artistic movements to be socially, politically and critically responsive, they must first review and challenge their own history and canon of practices. Artistic movements, as they evolve and are reconsidered over time, necessarily reflect and represent political climates and values. Hence, if they are not interrogated and restructured, they will continue to represent the *same* values. Examples of traditional

methodologies being challenged in this manner can be found across performance and fine art practices. In the early twentieth century, dance artists Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) and Vaslav Nijinsky (1890-1950) both subverted classical ballet technique in order to find new means of choreographic expression and communication. In 1913, Nijinsky collaborated with composer Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) to create the ballet and orchestral work entitled *Le Sacre du Printemps/The Rite of Spring*, set in Russia and centred on sacrificial pagan rituals. Nijinsky's choreography violated classical ballet traditions, drawing on jerky, stamping and inverted movements which worked in synergy with Stravinsky's dissonant polyrhythms. What was notably radical about Nijinsky's choreography is the manner in which it made the dancers appear as though they were being drawn down into the earth. It was the antithesis to classical ballet technique, which intended to give an illusion of weightlessness, as though the dancers are being pulled upwards. Whereas ballet aspired to an aesthetic of grace, elegance and lightness, *Le Sacre du Printemps/The Rite of Spring* embodied notions of carnality and primitivism with its heavy, jarring movements. Duncan likewise wanted to reconnect with more primitive ideals within her dance practice, in a quest to rediscover it as a sacred and ancient art form; disliking the rigidity of classical ballet, she sought to discover and to embody natural or free movement. In her 1902 essay 'The Dancer of the Future', Duncan argues:

The expression of the modern school of ballet, wherein each action is an end, and no movement, pose or rhythm is successive or can be made to evolve succeeding action, is an expression of degeneration, of living death. All the movements of our modern ballet school are sterile movements because they are unnatural: their purpose is to create the delusion that the law of gravitation does not exist for them...? (Duncan, 1996, 172)

There are parallels between Duncan's analysis of traditional ballet technique and more contemporary readings of aerial work, principally in the manner in which both traditional ballet and aerial techniques seek to defy gravity, or to enact a defiance of gravity. By appearing to overcome the earthly gravitational pull, the performer attempts to separate themselves from their humanness. Duncan's descriptions of ballet technique and the manner in which 'each action is an end' can be likened to the notion of the 'trick' in circus that has a clear beginning and end. In the same essay, Duncan exclaims: 'what ideal does the ballet express?' (Duncan, 1996, 172). By challenging the traditional ballet model, both Nijinsky and Duncan changed broader understandings of what dance is and what it is able to communicate. In the same manner, if aerial work, and circus disciplines overall, are to become more creatively inventive and critically rigorous, then artists and makers must follow similar modes of enquiry, and unpick the assumptions that underpin circus disciplines, what these are currently able to express and how they could evolve beyond this. Similarly, Lievens calls to the wider circus community to 'redefine' how circus is made and understood. For Lievens, circus continues to reproduce archaic values, failing to be self- or externally critical, and failing to 'relate to [...] wider movements in culture' (Lievens, 2015). She emphasises:

It is important that we become more aware of the fact that the skillful forms of circus are expressions of a very particular way of seeing and experiencing the world. As long as we continue to replicate the model of the past, we will fail to connect our craft to the underlying questions — of what we're doing, why we're doing it and how we do it — and we will keep on communicating exactly that: craft. (Lievens, 2015)

This statement points to the uncritical dependence on and reproduction of virtuosity, spectacle and heroic narratives within circus performance works. If these remain uninterrogated, circus and circus-related

performance will continue effectively to perpetuate narratives suggestive of colonialism, expansionism and dominance. It is vital for circus artists to acknowledge performance as a web of cultural signs and to consider the implications of prioritising formal skill, above all else, within a performance. Failure to do so means that circus artists will not only continue to align their practices with ideas surrounding oppression and supremacy, but will also not be able to communicate beyond such ideas. Individual circus disciplines equally demand interrogation to better understand what each has to offer. Only then may performance makers find new possibilities for circus practice and establish a place for circus in critical performance genres.

### Aerial Work in Contemporary Performance

I have argued that the role of the critically engaged artist is to address their position within the wider social and economic system and to expose its assumed values and embedded hierarchies. Undoubtedly, the potential conflict between spectacular or virtuosic performance and critical performance-making represents a challenge. However, this is not to say that spectacle or virtuosity cannot be used within critical performance-making, nor that circus disciplines can only be presented in a spectacular or virtuosic context. Instead, the artist must consider how the aesthetics of form could potentially be used to support the performance theme or concept. For example, if used critically, spectacle may function to draw audience attention to power structures, hierarchies and ‘dramas of the performative society’ (Kershaw, 2001, 206). By the same means, circus artists can look at the layered possibilities inherent in individual performance disciplines. This thesis and the practice-based research that underpins it is concerned with, specifically, the different opportunities attached to aerial rope work, including those to do with verticality, virtuosity, spectacle, the use of loops and drops, and what all these are able to offer a performance work or concept. My research employs two different methodologies and strategies, the objective of both being to use aerial work in a critical performance context. First, as detailed earlier in this chapter, I have drawn

on Kershaw's model of 'spectacles of deconstruction', applying this to works that feature aerial performance and in my own aerial practice (Kershaw, 2003, 595). 'Spectacles of deconstruction' (or deconstructive spectacles) are 'spectacles that displace the nature of the "real"' and are described by Kershaw as the 'spectacles which may best carry the charge of activism in the contemporary world' (2003, 595-596). This model is already adopted across contemporary performance practices, but rarely utilized within circus. The second methodology I utilise is one that experiments with removing virtuosity and spectacle, or the appearance of virtuosity and spectacle, from aerial performance. This methodology attempts to create a more 'pedestrian' choreographic quality which encourages spectators to look beyond the virtuosic body and instead at the human body itself, its position in space and its relation to aerial equipment and objects. This type of choreography is stripped of 'showmanship' and often appears as functional, rather than decorative. Although, this choreographic style is still currently underrepresented within the circus genre, it emerged within dance in the mid-twentieth century.

Postmodern dance choreographer Yvonne Rainer was one of the first movement artists who explicitly reconsidered the use of virtuosity in her work. In her 1968 essay 'A Quasi Survey of Some "Minimalist" Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, Or an Analysis of Trio A', Rainer criticises the use of virtuosity in dance and considers how else the movements of the human body could be presented:

The display of technical virtuosity and the display of the dancers specialized body no longer makes sense. Dancers have been driven to search for an alternative context that allows for a more matter-of- fact, more concrete, more banal quality of physical being in performance, a context

where people are engaged in actions and movements making a less spectacular demand on the body and in which skill is hard to locate. (Rainer, 1996, 329-330).

Rainer's choreographic style reflected these ethics, prioritising pedestrian or task-based movement that existed without additional or unnecessary ornamentation, and featuring everyday gestures and repetitious, non-physically exertive phrases. The purpose of her choreography was not to exhibit a performer's physical training or skills, but rather to foreground the movements themselves. Rainer considered that virtuosic display problematically encouraged audiences to invest in 'the artifice of performance' (Rainer, in Huxley & Witts eds., 1996, 329). She also rejected modes of emotionally expressive dance on the basis that they provided a sensationalised experience of human emotion. In 1965, with these ideals in mind, she created a performance 'Manifesto', which urged:

No to spectacle.

No to virtuosity.

No to transformations and magic and make-believe.

No to the glamour and transcendency of the star image.

No to the heroic.

No to the anti-heroic.

No to trash imagery.

No to involvement of performer or spectator.

No to style.

No to camp.

No to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer.

No to eccentricity.

No to moving or being moved (Rainer, 1965)

Rainer's 'Manifesto' responded to the manner in which performance work was created within a western capitalist context, and further, how the use of artifice seemed to widen the gap between performer and audience. The model I adopt in my own practice does not exclude all the strategies to which Rainer objected. However, drawing on Rainer's research and response to the political zeitgeist of the 1960s, my own approach accepts that stylistic elements should be included where the underlying concept of a work necessitates this. My approach is also influenced by Rainer's argument for the role and the social significance of dance and performance, and is informed by Rainer's rejection of choreographic clichés.

In the interests of researching aerial work as critical practice and finding new contexts in which to make and present, it is useful to consider the manner in which other performance genres deal with or present movement, spectacle, the human body and the virtuosic body in a critical context; this means examining differences and overlaps between aerial work and critical genres such as dance, live art, experimental theatre, cabaret and contemporary performance. Contemporary approaches to critical performance-making regularly blur the boundaries between performance genres, working in a manner that is both cross- and trans-disciplinary, and thus creating practice that resists easy categorisation. In *Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory*, Susan Broadhurst identifies defining characteristics of such performance works as 'hybridization and indeterminacy', a striving 'to play the edge of the possible, continually challenging not only performance practice but also traditional aesthetic concepts (Broadhurst, 1999, 1). Such liminal and hybrid approaches are useful in considering the potential of aerial work, as well as in its possible connections with other creative disciplines and fields. However, for this thesis, and research project overall, it has been necessary to delineate performance genres in order to draw on their methodologies, explore their potential value in association with aerial, and assess how aerial work might be considered *outside* of a circus framework, and the implications of

that for the genre as a whole. One framework that could be adopted in this context is the broad category of contemporary performance. According to Caden Manson, curator of the Contemporary Performance Network, contemporary performance is already a 'hybrid' of 'performance works and artists that travel between the fields of Experimental Theatre and Dance, Video Art, Visual Art, Music Composition and Performance Art without adhering to one specific field's practice' (Manson). This self-conscious liminality means that contemporary practice is able to encompass aerial work amongst its other mediums and disciplines. The blending of disciplines naturally challenges hierarchies and presumptions inherent within practices, particularly those that may traditionally foreground virtuosity such as dance, circus and music. Broadhurst argues that the framework of contemporary performance implies or invites 'the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass/popular culture' (Broadhurst, 1999, 13). This makes it an effective framework when creating critical work that deals with cultural issues, as it draws on whatever performative resources are necessary, without feeling bound or loyal to any particular aesthetic or style. In this manner, comparing aerial work and dance is a fruitful area for research as both genres are centred around bodily-engaged and choreographic practice. The focus of dance and movement-based practice is fundamentally the actions and aesthetics of the human body and its connection to space. The primary difference between dance and live art is that dance is always centred around the human body, whereas live art can manifest in a variety of different mediums. The Live Art Development Agency (UK) describes live art as 'a research engine, driven by artists who are working across forms, contexts and spaces to open up new artistic models, new languages for the representation of ideas and identities, and new strategies for intervening in the public sphere' (LADA, 2018). In this way, live art is a method for reconsidering and resisting existing social models, hierarchies and relations. According to artist Joshua Sofaer:

Live Art is when an artist chooses to make work directly in front of the audience in space and time. So instead of making an object, or an environment (a painting for example) and leaving it for the audience to encounter in their own time, Live Art comes into being at the actual moment of encounter between artist and spectator (Sofaer, 2002)

Live art considers the manner in which art or performance is experienced, disrupting both the relationship between performer and spectator, and also the notion of art solely as entertainment or as a product for consumption. This is in contrast to the way in which aerial work has been consumed and experienced as entertainment within both traditional and contemporary circus. However, the common thread that both aerial work and live art share is the staging of presence and risk in performance. The idea of risk in circus disciplines is a well-debated and controversial topic, a recurrent argument being that the level of training required for circus disciplines cancels out or greatly reduces the risks that circus is premised on. Where aerial work in circus, and circus disciplines more broadly, reject failure (unless pretended, as a staged prerequisite to success), live art actively embraces it. Performance events that foster live art practices, such as Thomas John Bacon's annual festival Tempting Failure, are evidence of this. In this context, live artists use failure as a method for re-connecting with human fragility and disrupting what Bacon describes as the 'growth of fascism, conservatism and extremism [...] and the mediatization and bombardment of technology' within mass culture (Bacon, 2018). The fragility of the human performer is a recurring theme within contemporary circus narratives, particularly in relation to aerial work. In an interview for *Theatre Bristol*, Firenza Guidi, director of No Fit State Circus's show *Bianco*, describes the importance of human fragility in her work:

The performers come with a skill that takes years to master and perfect. But they also come with a past, their hang-ups and obsessions, their vulnerability and fears, their thirst for life and sense of

humour, their life scars and their hopes. Like a visual artist, I paint and make narratives weaving their physical ability with their memory and desire. I cajole a particular colour or emotion out of them. I sometimes push them into unknown territories. The fusion of all this makes a new narrative even though the tricks used are part of their bag of tools. (Theatre Bristol, 2018)

Guidi has a unique performance language, the methodology of which is influenced by Philippe Gaulier's clowning techniques. Clowning highlights liveness and the ability of the human to fail, the irony of the technique being that, here, failure is the path to success. The possibility of failure is evident in Guidi's work, demonstrated by her foregrounding of the performers' human experiences alongside virtuosic skill. However, the paradox of the circus performer within the circus framework is that they are never truly able to fail, and can never be truly fragile, thus making them inherently heroic. Within critical work, the demonstration of failure, in one capacity or another, is an important opposing narrative to those of success and progress. As Sara Jane Bailes has influentially argued:

The discourse of failure as reflected in western art and literature seems to counter the very ideas of progress and victory that simultaneously dominate historical narratives. It undermines the perceived stability of mainstream capitalist ideology's preferred aspiration to achieve, succeed or win [...]. A discourse of failure in art practice has mapped a vibrant counter-cultural space [...] in which conventional standards of virtuosity are challenged. (Bailes, 2011, 2)

Hence, the 'counter-cultural' space created by acts of failure, as identified by Bailes, provides opportunities within which to challenge hierarchies and existing scripts within society. Failure produces the unexpected and so deviates from the norm. Yet the notion of failure, fundamentally conflicts with the ethos of circus and circus training, where one is meant to succeed in the presentation of virtuosic

movement and also to succeed in the staged failure of virtuosic movement. However, the presence of authentic struggle and even failure in aerial work could in turn enable new methods of reconsidering it both in conjunction with and within the context of critically engaged performance.

Despite the predominance of narratives around virtuosity, spectacle and mastery, a few artists have begun to use aerial work as part of a critical practice that intersects with live art and other forms of contemporary performance. Aerial artist and cabaret theatre performer Empress Stah stated in an interview with the *Guardian* that the cabaret scene's preoccupation with entertainment is limiting and that her own works 'explore bigger ideas' (Samadder, 2016). According to Stah, her productions, which draw on a range of aerial disciplines, 'are about gender fluidity, evolution, the universe, inequality, religion' (2016). Her most notable work is *Stargasm Laser Ass Aerial* (2014), commissioned by SPILL Festival of Performance and featuring a soundtrack written for Stah by the musician Peaches. The act features Stah performing an aerial routine on a suspended metal hexagon (much like an aerial hoop), whilst simultaneously projecting a laser show from a butt plug inserted into her anus. In doing this *Stargasm Laser Ass Aerial* places the penetrated human subject at the centre of an aerial spectacle, presenting a deconstructed notion of the female subject in conjunction with technological intervention. Empress Stah has created numerous other works that feature aerial apparatus, including *Aerial Queen* (2012) and *The Vagina Oracle* (2016). Performance artists Vincent Riebeek and Florentina Holzinger also use aerial apparatus, but locate their work within broader choreographical terms rather than identifying as aerialists. Their show *Kein Applaus für Scheisse/No Applause for Shit* (2011) is described on the Arnolfini website as 'an elusive mix of dance, trashy pop, theatre, roller skating, acrobatics and love' (Arnolfini, 2013). According to the show descriptor, 'Holzinger and Riebeek flirt with the limits of each other and with everything that is possible onstage', resulting in 'a surprising and rich portrait of contemporary pop culture' (Arnolfini, 2013). *Kein*

*Applaus für Scheisse* refers to imagery that permeated early performance art and actively tries to test the boundaries of both the performers and audience. A review by Maddy Costa in *Exeunt Magazine* describes the bodily mess within the work and scenes created when Riebeek vomits ‘Slush-Puppy-blue liquid over [Holzinger’s] bare stomach’ and later when ‘he stands naked over her prostrate body and lets out a stream of urine’ (Costa, 2013). There is a scene where Holzinger performs an aerial silks act whilst Riebeek remains on the ground and ‘talks to us about money, love and his six-year relationship with Holzinger’ (Costa, 2013). The aerial silks routine is a moment for the audience to look at Holzinger and to create a sense of distance between her and the audience. Like the aerial work in their other shows, the silks act is fairly rudimentary. If framed within a circus context, aside from the use of height, the use of silks is not virtuosic when compared to other more developed aerial choreography. The manner in which their bodies move on and around the aerial kit suggests that they have not undergone rigorous training in this discipline, thus depicting a fragility that would not be apparent if a trained aerialist performed the same movements. Across Holzinger and Riebeek’s works, the use of aerial becomes an opportunity for audiences to look more reflectively at their bodies and movement, and their relationship to each other and in space. Another example of aerial work being used within critical practice is within physical theatre company DV8’s film *Enter Achilles* (1996), a piece that challenges notions of masculinity within the setting of British pub. The aerial work takes the form of a short doubles rope act, performed by two men outside the pub: the act contributes to the critique of representations of male identity, by portraying homoerotic interactions between performers and exploring childish fantasies of becoming a superhero.

Finally, as well as examining performances that have found ways to incorporate aerial work critically, it is useful to consider artists whose work deal with virtuosity and spectacle within a deconstructive methodology but without the use of aerial specifically. For example, contemporary performance artist Lauren Barri Holstein’s *Splat!* (2013) explores and rejects ‘a number of traumatic female identities’ by

exploring notions of ‘incompleteness’ through unfinished spectacles and scenes (Holstein, 2014, 98). Holstein utilizes notions of ‘incompleteness’, in order ‘to puncture models of female subjectivity presented in pop-feminist narratives of trauma and survival’ (Holstein, 2014, 98). Holstein’s employment of virtuosity (in the form of ballet dancing and singing) within *Splat!* is used to illustrate the ‘success’ of the ‘female subject’ and to draw attention to ideas of completeness, in relation to how that subject is represented in mass culture (2014, 101). Holstein’s use of the incomplete spectacle can be likened to Kershaw’s description of ‘spectacles of deconstruction’, in that both seek to displace social narratives and realities (Kershaw, 2003, 595). A very different approach can be found in the work of performance artist Augusto Corrieri, whose deliberately understated performance of magic and sleight-of-hand card tricks challenges principles of spectacle and virtuosity. Corrieri performs as a magician under the pseudonym of Vincent Gambini. In a video performance entitled *Eight Hidden Movements by Vincent Gambini* (2015), Corrieri performs a series of card tricks, beginning:

So, this is a trick in which nothing happens. I have a pack of cards, of course. But I am not going to do...I am not going to do anything with them (Gambini, 2015)

Corrieri then continues to casually move the cards around, both between his hands and on the table in front of him. The card switches and tricks occur without any representational finesse or additional showmanship, occurring so subtly that the viewer has to pay close attention to even notice that the trick has occurred. This way of pedestrianising the trick, or hiding the trick, is a technique that can be applied to other traditionally ‘trick-based’ disciplines, including aerial, and is an approach I demonstrate via my own practice later in this thesis.

## Conclusion

By analysing the history of circus, it becomes possible to identify the origins of, and connections between, aerial work and narratives of freedom, success, heroism and glamour. Particularly pertinent is the link between nationalism, western imperialism and dominance, and the notions of virtuosity and spatial dominance associated with aerial performance. Aerial work, as part of traditional circus, has in the past been utilized as a means of social and political propaganda, in terms of dramatically ‘re-enacting’ wars and in the process communicating ideas of western superiority. It has also been used, historically and in a contemporary context, as a way of embodying notions of social, philosophical and technological progress. I argue that aerial work today continues to serve as an ideological vehicle to the extent that it functions to reinforce mainstream ideals of beauty, perfection and success, acting in accordance with Debord’s notion of ‘spectacle’ (Debord, 1983). Throughout its evolution, the circus genre has managed to sustain two conflicting ideologies: first, that it has encompassed traditional norms and values; second, that it is an institution that depends on, and welcomes people from, the fringes of society. The Bakhtin-influenced perception ‘that the circus is a place where we can get closer to who we truly are, away from the everyday world and from everyday thinking’ has contributed to maintaining the circus genre’s subversive identity (Lievens, 2017). In this way, the circus has been represented as a site of freedoms, where social norms are reversed or challenged. This has also justified the circus genre’s reliance on virtuosity, in terms of equating extraordinary physical ability with associations and assumptions of freedom.

Developments in related fields, such as dance, have shown that circus, as a much younger performance genre, has yet to undergo some of the radical changes necessary for it to engage critically with social or political questions, to challenge its own aesthetics, and explore different possibilities for audience engagement. The fields of live art and contemporary performance offer different strategies for virtuosity and spectacle, perhaps particularly in terms of presenting the humanity, rather than the ‘superhumanity’, of the performer. As I examine in Chapters 2, 3, 4 & 5 of this thesis and have explored through my

creative practice, these forms offer methods and opportunities for employing aerial work as a means of engaging with complex themes and challenging mainstream representations of mental health, female identity, bodily aesthetics and political speech. However, as this chapter has shown, aerial work, as a discipline that has evolved predominantly from circus, comes with its own limitations and expectations. The use, expectations of, or abstention from physical virtuosity within aerial is central to this project.

Lievens argues:

When we cease to identify with virtuosity, a space may appear in which we can say something interesting about the things, dynamics and mechanisms that discipline our present day bodies. When we stop ‘showing’ our superpowers, a space may appear in which we can be ‘seen’ as ordinary human beings. (Lievens 2017)

Deviating from the use of virtuosity in aerial work, as Lievens proposes, enables a stripping back or exposure of human qualities such as awkwardness or failure. As I argue, the self-conscious use of failure in performance acts counter to notions of progress and perfection encouraged by mainstream culture. However, the place of ‘failure’ in aerial is perhaps less clear. Is aerial work inherently virtuosic, as a discipline which engages with and takes place in vertical space and which therefore is physically beyond the scope of the everyday? Can the ‘spectacular’ qualities inherent in aerial be deployed critically, through reinvention and subversion, as a means of provocatively engaging with ideas of labour, representation and dominance? These are issues I return to in Chapters 4 and 5 and which continue to drive my professional practice. In further response to these questions, this study will demonstrate that placing aerial in a wider critical and performance context illuminates the use and abuse of spectacle, and provides new insights on the presence or absence of virtuosity.

## **Chapter 2**

## **You Are What You Think:**

### **Challenging Perfection and the Physicalization of Mental Illness in the Neoliberal Age**

This chapter examines how effectively aerial choreography may be harnessed to explore and convey themes of mental illness, control and human (dis)connection. This enquiry is predominately channeled through a case study of *Box of Frogs* (2012) by Mish Weaver of Stumble Dance Circus, in addition to a shorter comparative analysis on the use of aerial work in *Smoke and Mirrors* (2015) by The Ricochet Project and *Birdy* (2014) by Osborne & What. *Box of Frogs* is a circus-theatre show built around issues of mental health, mania, depression and the struggle for ‘wholeness’. I argue that in its engagement with such issues, *Box of Frogs* works effectively to counter neoliberal aspirations for perfection, beauty, social integration and cohesive selfhood. By means of diverse performative strategies, *Box of Frogs* affirmatively presents the image of the “incomplete” person, and physicalizes ideas surrounding illness, frustration, anger, fragility and loneliness. *Box of Frogs* is a multi-disciplined ensemble show, commissioned by Cultural Olympiad in 2012, for the Unlimited Festival and devised in response to the question: ‘If Circus IS Bipolar Disorder, what would that look like?’ (Stumble Dance Circus, 2012). It draws on Weaver’s own long standing struggles and experiences of bipolar disorder. In an interview with Catherine Scott, Weaver states that

*Box of Frogs* is my way of explaining the experience through movement, colour, form, music, people, words [...] My passion is circus and my experience is bipolar disorder. *Box of Frogs* brings the two together. (Scott, 2012)

In *Box of Frogs* Weaver uses aerial and other circus performance forms to stage different facets of bipolar disorder, such as: depression; mania; irritability; over-sensitivity to visual and aural stimulus; self-doubt;

elation; overtalking; overthinking; feeling full of energy; feeling lacking in energy; feelings of worthlessness; and erratic and delusional behaviour. As I shall show, to engage with and communicate such experience, *Box of Frogs* utilizes repetition and visual scoring as performative strategies throughout, both verbally and physically.

This chapter begins by considering the representation of mental illness in drama, soap opera, horror and thriller television genres, in addition to a brief examination of recent ground-based contemporary performance projects that investigate or present themes around mental health and mental illness. These are followed by a detailed deconstruction of the two aerial rope scenes in *Box of Frogs* and a short analysis of the use of aerial work in conjunction with issues surrounding mental health in *Smoke and Mirrors* and *Birdy*. My analysis is primarily concerned to show first, how aerial choreography is employed to communicate such themes; and second, to propose that aerial brings to this material qualities and characteristics unique to this performance discipline. This research also considers the role of autobiographical experience in performance making, specifically on the subject of mental health. Central themes of the chapter include autobiographical performance, the relationship between aerial physicality and spoken text, human fallibility, spectacle, control, verticality, repetition and the use of sonic and verbal narration. The chapter also considers the limitations of aerial work in this context, specifically with regard to choreographic communication. I will argue that a work like *Box of Frogs* constitutes an important intervention into the unrealistic narratives of personal fulfilment and wholeness which are encouraged under neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberal ideas of success and achievement inadvertently stigmatize individuals whose mental health status does not reflect such narratives, and by the same means widens the gap between real and represented experience, and illness and wellness. As I introduce in Chapter 1, the divide between ‘real’ and ‘represented’ experience is notably addressed by Guy Debord in his seminal text *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Debord proposes that ‘spectacle’ divides society into a dualism of

reality and representation (Debord, 1983, 2). The 'spectacle' is the representation of what has been 'directly lived' and is formed from 'images' that are 'detached from every aspect of life', which then 'merge into a common stream' (Debord, 1983, 7). It is however, not only 'a collection of images', but 'a social relationship between people that is mediated by images', which has evolved with 'modern conditions of production' (Debord, 1983, 7). Although *Society of the Spectacle* was first published in 1967, over forty years ago, I argue that its ideas and observations remain relevant, perhaps more so now than they have ever been: in particular, with reference to dominant ideologies of success, achievement and wholeness which are perpetuated as both the ideal and the norm. I argue that the saturation of Western culture with such narratives profoundly affects both the mental health of individuals and societal perceptions of mental illness. Such narratives perpetuate the impression of mental illness as something that must be hidden, or at least as something that will be a source of guilt and shame for the sufferer.

Neoliberal work ethics of progress and high achievement are so widely prevalent that no cultural practice, including the practice of circus, can be untouched by their influence. In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I addressed how such themes pervade early traditional circus, in relation to colonialism, expansion and nationalism. The current chapter considers both circus and mental illness within the context of a society where '*representation*' has become 'independent' from reality and the dominant mode of perceiving the world (Debord, 2002, 18). The success of the majority of circus artists, including aerialists, has historically been - and is still - measured largely in terms of physical virtuosity and showmanship. In essence, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the more capable, strong and competent they are, the more successful they become. However, in the twenty-first century it is almost equally important for artists to be able to represent their abilities through various forms of media, as well as to demonstrate these in person. Social media platforms for video and photo sharing, in particular Instagram, have become a popular means for circus artists to share recent successes, performances, tricks and training techniques.

Instagram, like many forms of aesthetic representation on social media, is predominantly utilized in order to show the ‘best’ version of oneself. For example, circus artists who post photographs and videos on Instagram will often only show successful ‘tricks’ or choreographies and not the failed attempts, hence widening the gap between reality and representation. (Although in many ways circus as a genre embodies the neoliberal work ethic, whereby hard work equals success, the *reality* of circus training includes failure and fear, qualities that are incompatible with neoliberal ideas of accomplishment). In the words of Debord, ‘*fragmented* views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudo-world* that can only be looked at’ (Debord, 1983, 7). The bringing together of specific fragments of one’s life is a way of aspiring towards the notion of the perfect or whole body, and forming it as what Baudrillard describes in *The Consumer Society* as ‘a smoother, more perfect, more functional object for the outside world’ (Baudrillard, 1998, 131). With this in mind, I suggest that works such as *Box of Frogs* contribute to an emerging critical voice within the circus-theatre genre, one that challenges the notions of wholeness and perfection which underpin the ‘society of the spectacle’ (Debord, 2002). The expression of themes surrounding mental illness contradict and break the narratives of success and achievement which are both fostered by neoliberal politics, and also associated with and passed on from traditional circus.

### Challenging Stigma Through Performance

The misrepresentation and under-representation of mental health issues and disorders within the social economy has long-term and wider social ramifications, marginalising anyone who suffers in this way. According to the World Health Organisation, ‘one in four people in the world will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives’ (WHO, 2001). Regardless of this high percentage,

there exists, still, considerable stigma around feeling mentally unwell. In a discussion of mental illness as represented in popular television, Lesley Henderson emphasizes:

Stigma is [...] a product of social interaction between ‘the normal’ and ‘the stigmatized’. During the process of stigmatisation, people with mental illness are distinguished and labelled. Individuals who display certain characteristics which are culturally defined as ‘deviant’ thus become linked to undesirable features (‘labelled’) and open to discrimination. Labelling increases fear and perceptions of dangerousness which in turn increases social distance. (Henderson, 2018, 107)

Arguably, it is this fear of ‘discrimination’ and the negative associations of being ‘labelled’ that discourage individuals from openly discussing mental health conditions (2018). The effects of suppressing awareness and open dialogue around mental health can be seen on both an individual and a social level. According to the Mental Health Foundation, the leading cause of death in men under the age of 50 is suicide, yet ‘only 27% of people who died by suicide between 2005 and 2015 had been in contact with mental health services in the year before they died’ (MHF, 2018). The statistic shows, they suggest, that talking about suicide, and about mental health more generally, remains problematically stigmatized (MHF, 2018). The mental health charity Mind likewise underline that a primary reason why people experiencing mental health problems may not seek help is due to ‘the negative (and often unrealistic) way that people experiencing mental health problems are shown on TV, in films and by the media’ (Mind, 2018). Henderson’s research confirms this perspective, with reference to the representation of mental health issues or illness in television dramas and soaps. She suggests:

Soaps are a site of intense audience identification [...]. The genre can represent multiple viewpoints which means that soaps and drama have a definitional role in society providing ‘open’

space for progressive or unconventional representations of important societal issues in comparison with factual formats. (Henderson, 2018, 108)

One of the useful characteristics of television drama, Henderson proposes, is that it may be able to reflect the prevalence of mental health conditions by demonstrating how these can affect otherwise ‘normal’ people. The soap opera, in particular, has the added advantage of an extended time frame that makes it possible to introduce themes gradually, over weeks and months. Nonetheless, a difficulty inherent in television drama and the soap genre is precisely that these must deliver ‘drama’ for their audiences, which in the process risks sensationalizing mental health conditions. TV drama typically favours linear ‘cause and effect’ storylines, in which, as Henderson observes, ‘there has to be some progression’ so that audiences do not get ‘bored’ (Henderson, 2018, 113). Henderson emphasizes: ‘it is important to note that the production of meaning within television narratives is itself a particular practice rather than a mere reflection of reality’ (Henderson, 2018, 109). Within this context of meaning-making, mental health issues must be adapted or reconfigured to meet the medium’s dramaturgical needs; further, the inevitable simplification of these issues within such narratives problematically fosters a dualistic model of mental health – in which one is well, or unwell - which further reinforces social separation. In contemporary fictitious thriller and horror television and film genres, mental health issues are frequently dramatized and exaggerated to a preposterous extent. This is done in order to serve the needs of these genres, which is in essence, to provide audiences with an experience that is both frightening and exciting. In his seminal text ‘The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures’ (1970) Baudrillard states that ‘the ‘message’ of TV is not the images it transmits, but the new modes of relating and perceiving it imposes’ (Baudrillard, 1998, 123). Hence, the ‘message’, as described by Baudrillard, inscribed in the thriller and horror genres, is that mental illness is something to be feared and distanced from, as it is frequently presented in connection with violent, dangerous and threatening behaviour. In connection to this, asylums, psychiatric units and

hospitals are regularly portrayed as terrifying institutions, where patients are locked up, tortured and subject to invasive and damaging procedures, thereby communicating the message that mental illness needs to be met with aggression rather than care. In this way, horror and thriller genres may serve to reinforce stigma and social separation, by enforcing the notion that those with mental illnesses pose a threat and are incapable of ‘normal’ social integration. Anna Harpin and Juliet Foster critique the ‘lazy and deeply damaging stereotypes of mental illness’ that are presented within the horror and thriller genres, and the way in which ‘madness is framed as entertaining, titillating spectacle’ (Harpin & Foster, 2014, 2). Mental illness or ‘madness’ is another facet of human behavior that has been extracted from reality, dramatized and altered, in order to be commodified and finally, consumed in its representative form. The ‘grace of technology’ as described by Baudrillard, ‘wipes out [...] the very principle of social reality’ and thus the reality of society’s collective mental health (Baudrillard, 1998, 32). Such representation, as I have detailed, reinforces the gap between those who have some form of mental illness, and the rest of society. In an interview with the byline ‘Why Ugliness Is Vital in the Age of Social Media’, disability justice organizer Mia Mingus comments on the binary division between illness and wellness, and able and disabled, asserting that ‘one of the ways that freak shows were used’ historically ‘was as a way to create and reinforce normative identities’ (ALOK, 2018). Within the neoliberal economic politic, ‘normative identities’ of success, achievement and wellness are also reinforced via the labelling of failure, breakdown and illness. Neoliberal ‘representations of lived experience’ present largely unrealistic narratives of high achievement in juxtaposition with distorted images of mental illness (Debord, 1983, 53). Through representation, real life human existence becomes squeezed into polar extremes at either end of a scale, where at one end exists high achievement, perfection, sanity and social integration, and at the other end failure, insanity and social exclusion. Neither the lived experience of mental illness *or* wellness can be understood through such representation. Acknowledging the complexities, fluctuations and variations in mental health, rather than the reductive labelling of ill or well,

positively universalizes mental health as a concern for all, thus countering risks of stigmatization and isolation; such considerations powerfully undermine neoliberal ideologies of success and wholeness, demonstrating that the concept of illness cannot be ‘cleanly’ separated from that of wellness.

Recent performative research projects and initiatives on the subject of mental illness and mental health include *Madlove* (2016) by The Vacuum Cleaner, *Ecologies of Care* (2014) by Ria Hartley and *The Sick of the Fringe* (2015) which was founded by Brian Lobel and Tracy Gentles. Performance artist Lucy Hutson’s recently published book *Everything in My Head at One Time in My Life* details a three-week period when she was hospitalized in a mental health facility (Hutson, 2018). Within contemporary performance, increasing efforts have thus been made by artists to explore, and to authentically present, the complexities of living with a mental illness or mental health issues, that go beyond the binary of ill and well. Many artists, like Weaver, utilize their own experiences with, or connections to, mental illness, as a means of interrogation and as a starting point for devising and discussion. Such autobiographical performance work is devised from first-hand experiences of mental illness and is usually performed by the artist themselves. By drawing on personal experience in presenting to an audience, the artist/performer works to counter the social separation encouraged by neoliberal representation. Presenting varied experiences from different perspectives, as within autobiographical performance, complicates ideas around mental health, so making social categories and people less easy to define. The multifaceted nature of performance provides a platform for different perspectives, in addition to a range of ‘visual, aural, verbal, olfactory and tactile possibilities’, which, ‘in conjunction with the palpability of its liveness’, make theatre for Harpin ‘a distinct place of human cultural exchange’ (Harpin, 2014, 202). By offering such exchanges, performance work on the subject of mental health has the capacity to create or to instigate social integration. Autobiographical performance, or performance that draws on autobiographical experience, can, in the words of Deirdre Heddon, act ‘as a means to reveal otherwise

invisible lives' (Heddon, 2007, 3). In this way, autobiographical performance provides a platform for personal accounts of mental illness that may otherwise remain hidden, due to both social stigma and physical visibility of symptoms. Creative or performative means of exploring mental illness provide an opportunity to explore related themes from a perspective that is not based on scientific or medical research, but rather, is grounded in subjective, human experience. Presenting subjective experiences is an important part of building relationships and understanding between stigmatized social groups, such as those with mental illnesses, and wider society. Heddon concurs with this view:

the relationship between marginalised subjects and the appeal of autobiographical performance is not co-incidental. Autobiographical performances can capitalise on theatre's unique temporality, its here and nowness, and on its ability to respond to and engage with the present, while always keeping an eye on the future. In particular, autobiographical performance can engage with the pressing matters of the present which relate to equality, to justice, to citizenship, to human rights. (Heddon, 2007, 2)

The ability to engage with current issues or recent histories is crucial in diminishing the divisions between social groups and addressing marginalization. By connecting the personal with the political, audiences are able to witness how widely shared social views regarding mental illness impact upon the individual. In a short performance film commissioned by LADA (Live Art Development Agency) performance artist Bobby Baker demonstrates, using as props a series of different pieces of fruit, how different people respond to her when they find out that she has a mental illness (LADA, 2014). For example, one particular 'group' of people, described by Baker, are the 'lemon lippers', who make a face as though they are eating a real lemon when informed of a person's mental illness (LADA, 2014). Baker reenacts this response by eating a slice of lemon, pursing her lips and sucking in her cheeks and asserts that 'lemon lips

can be applied to any situation where you are slightly repelled by people' (LADA, 2014). In this way, Baker explicitly makes reference to the way that individuals with mental health issues are marginalized. Her commentary on people's different reactions to her mental illness is interspersed with anecdotes and banal details from her life, and in doing this she merges her identity of someone with a mental illness, with other personal traits and tastes, thus creating connections between mental illness and the everyday.

Other recent and notable theatrical performance works that draw on autobiographical and or lived experiences of mental illness include *Fake it 'til you Make it* (2015) by Bryony Kimmings and *Black* (2013) by Le Gateau Chocolat. *Fake it 'til you Make it* is a one-hour theatre show that draws on the individual and shared experiences of performance artist Kimmings and her partner Tim Grayburn, the latter a sufferer of clinical depression. Performed by both Kimmings and Grayburn, the work focuses on how the diagnosis and lived-experience of clinical depression affects love, personal relationships and sense of self, specifically in relation to male identity. *Fake it 'til you Make it* juxtaposes Kimmings' and Grayburn's individual perspectives: Grayburn's lived reality of clinical depression, including suicidal thoughts and social anxieties, and Kimmings' fears and concerns regarding Grayburn's battle with the disorder. The work demonstrates the multiple perspectives and complexities of a romantic relationship in tandem with mental illness, and the compromises that are necessary in order to navigate the two together. By presenting personal first-hand experiences Kimmings provides an authentic insight into the challenges that stem from being in love and in a relationship with somebody who has depression. *Black* (2013) is a one-hour solo show by Le Gateau Chocolat based on the artist's autobiographical experiences of minoritization with regard to race, ethnicity, sexuality and mental illness. Le Gateau Chocolat is a singer and performer who specializes in opera, cabaret and drag performance, and during *Black* covers an eclectic range of songs and musical works by Wagner, Nina Simone, Purcell, Billie Holiday and Whitney Houston, accompanied by a live twelve-piece orchestra. According to Le Gateau Chocolat, *Black* was

made in order to connect the many different associations of ‘being black’, ‘not just black in colour’, such as being gay, being overweight, being depressed and being a drag performer (Homotopia Festival, 2013). He describes *Black* as a ‘confessional portrait’, within which he wanted the audience to connect with the ‘humanity’ of the performer (Le Gateau Chocolat, 2015: Homotopia Festival, 2013). The eclectic musical score featured in *Black* is employed and curated as a means to represent the multifaceted emotional spectrum experienced by Le Gateau Chocolat, with regard to his depression and feelings surrounding personal identity. Musicologist Stephen Davis suggests that when listening to a musical work’s ‘expressive features’, individuals recognise and identify ‘pattern and order, such as one might find in the succession of a person’s actions or feelings’ (Davis, 1997, 98). In the case of *Black*, the music serves as both a reference and point of intervention for Le Gateau Chocolat’s feelings of melancholia or oppression. As opposed to speech or text, music offers the audience an alternative means of accessing his internal dialogue and personal histories, by providing listeners with a subjective emotive experience, rather than one that is objective or clinical. What Kimmings, Le Gateau Chocolat and Baker all do, as I have shown through their examples, is juxtapose the creators’ experiences of mental illness with other aspects of their lives, in particular, the banal or everyday. In doing this, these artists offer an ‘expansion of the notion of reality and a destabilization of the categories of illness and health’ (Harpin, 2014, 207). Furthermore, with all of these works the notion of mental illness or psychological distress is physically and conceptually located as present, therefore connecting audiences with the immediacy of the issues that attach to it.

### Bipolar Circus, Vertical Escapes and Coping Strategies

*Box of Frogs* communicates Mish Weaver's autobiographical experiences of bipolar disorder via the spectacle and virtuosity of aerial rope, juggling, hand-to-hand acrobatics, clowning, trick bike and hula hooping. It features performers Paddy Waters, Silvia Pavone, Lyn Routledge, Kaveh Rahnama, Chris Patfield, Gemma Palomar and Lauren Hendry, who in the production each represent a different facet of bipolar disorder, and two live musicians, Howard Jacobs and Simon King. Unlike the aforementioned examples by Baker, Kimmings and Le Gateau Chocolat, in *Box of Frogs*, Weaver does not present her experiences of bipolar disorder herself in person, but instead chooses to mediate them via the various circus disciplines employed within the work. In this way, the performers are responsible for enacting Weaver's relationship to and experience with bipolar disorder. Although the performers effectively 'play themselves', they do so whilst taking on the characteristics, as determined by Weaver, of someone who is experiencing the symptoms of bipolar disorder. It is not made explicit in any publicity material or the show itself, whether any of the performers in *Box of Frogs* have experience of bipolar disorder or any other sort of mental health conditions. In an interview with Mark Morreau, Weaver describes how bipolar disorder both informed the show and her identity as an artist:

It's been very personal, saying "I have bipolar disorder" and this is my history and this is driven from my personal experience. In *Box of Frogs* the instability that I am working with is very firmly in the mind and the performers are using their bodies to communicate that. (Morreaux, 2012)

Weaver proposes that circus is an ideal medium for representing the divergent and sometimes intense characteristics and fluctuations of the disorder, as one predicated on the expression of 'huge extremes: obsession; extreme risk taking; ludicrous endeavour; repetition; brightness; loving of showing off; of vanity' (Morreaux, 2012). These qualities inherent in circus overlap with those associated with the manic

characteristics of bipolar disorder, previously known as manic depression, a condition that likewise induces extreme mood swings: according to the NHS, ‘people with bipolar disorder have periods or episodes of: depression – feeling very low and lethargic’ and ‘mania – feeling very high and overactive (less severe mania is known as hypomania)’ (NHS, 2016). Out of all of the circus disciplines used in *Box of Frogs*, aerial rope is the only one that enables the exploration of bipolar disorder symptoms on the vertical plane. In addition to this, the language and physical demands of aerial rope offer spatial metaphors of ascent and descent, and enable the performer to be removed, or to escape from the horizontal. The repetitious climbing that performing aerial rope entails, becomes a visual representation of the repetitive and relentless nature of bipolar disorder. Because aerial work, unlike ground-based disciplines, is performed in a vertical or transverse spatial context, it is removed from the everyday activity that occurs on the horizontal plane. In doing this, it offers an alternative way of perceiving the human subject, and also, I suggest, the human psyche. Harpin argues that within a game of chess, ‘the allusion to the horizontal and vertical move of a knight’ suggests a ‘loosening of association and unexpected shifts in thinking’ (Harpin, 2014, 204). By the same means, in *Box of Frogs* the use of verticality demonstrates a deviation from everyday or commonplace ways of understanding mental illness and the mentally ill subject. It uses a number of different performative strategies in communicating themes, issues and symptoms surrounding the mania and depression associated with bipolar disorder, specifically: repetition, layering, juxtaposition, visual scoring and sound. Throughout, the show employs a comedic style to tackle profoundly uncomfortable subject matter, also combining the spectacle and high formal accomplishment characteristic of circus disciplines with the fallibility and vulnerability of mental illness. The overarching narrative of *Box of Frogs* does not follow a linear story, but instead presents the different facets of bipolar disorder as a series of interconnected events and happenings. Throughout the work, the audience is subject to an unrelenting sensory overload, via complex layering of music, sound, and the voices and physical activity of the performers. The overwhelming impact of *Box of Frogs* in

performance suggests that Weaver intends audiences to be challenged to ‘endure’ the show, more than be entertained. The circus acts are punctured by each of the performer’s verbal and physical commentaries, meaning that audiences are never able to take full, uninterrupted pleasure in spectacle or virtuosity. Hence, in this instance, the audience are confronted by the relentlessness of bipolar disorder and the individual ongoing struggles experienced by the characters. What is more, the presentation of the ‘failure’ of mental illness and the struggles of bipolar disorder, in conjunction with circus disciplines, acts to counter the neoliberal notion that one is ‘a set of assets—skills and attributes—to be managed, maintained, developed, and treated as ventures in which to invest’ (Sugarman, 2015, 104). In using manifest, high-level physical ability to articulate illness, *Box of Frogs* complicates concepts of success with reference both to the human in society and to the circus artist. All of the characters presented in *Box of Frogs* are shown to experience shifts through manic, depressive and mixed states at a certain point during the show. Since these mood changes are seen to strike the different figures at different times, the audience is presented with ever-changing interactions between them in their varying degrees of mania and depression.

The two aerial rope scenes in *Box of Frogs* are performed by Lyn Routledge. Routledge presents herself at the beginning of the show as if more grounded and ‘neutral’ than the other performers. Approximately twenty minutes in, Routledge’s behavior shifts and she becomes introverted and quiet. She pulls her rope into the centre of the stage and wraps it between her legs and round her waist, creating a makeshift ‘seat’ that she can give her weight to. She gathers the remainder of the rope into her chest, wrapping her arms protectively around her body. Rahnama, who, in *Box of Frogs*, is presented as having hypomania and never stops talking, begins directing what he is saying to Routledge, who ignoring him, begins to count out loud, whilst climbing the rope. As Routledge climbs higher, Rahnama continues to talk to her and to

attempt to get her attention: ‘Lyn! Lyn! Lyn! Lyn!’ (Stumble Dance Circus, 2012). Routledge continues counting, using the sound of the words to create a consistent rhythm which she uses to focus her attention away from the chaos surrounding her. However, when she reaches the top of the rope, her counting begins to lose its original rhythmic consistency in the face of Rahnama’s chatter. Rahnama lies down at the bottom of the rope, talking still more rapidly and loudly. Routledge begins her descent, using a combination of rolls and rotations, whilst still continuing to count. The act ends when she reaches the bottom of the rope. Throughout, Routledge’s aerial rope choreography is clean and controlled, and matches the steady rhythm of her counting. Both her physical work on the rope and the process of counting are signalled as strategies for coping and resisting self-implosion, losing control or emotional breakdown. The deliberation in the aerial choreography conveys the impression that the performer is ‘going through the motions’, making the rope work a visual metaphor as well as a literal task, or series of tasks, that need completing, with the counting employed to enable this. The incessant talking of Rahnama that is overlaid on top of this presents itself as a representation of two different potential symptoms of bipolar disorder: the first is an oversensitivity to sounds and noises, which can result in feelings of anxiety; the second is ‘hearing voices’, a possible psychotic hallucinatory symptom of bipolar disorder or for the racing thoughts also associated with the condition. A recognised behavioural strategy for dealing with these inner voices is to ‘ignore the voices, block them out or distract yourself’ (Mind, 2018). Routledge’s counting and climbing presents as a means with which to shift her focus away from Rahnama’s intrusive voice and onto something physically and aurally tangible. The verticality of the aerial rope enables her to be physically and metaphorically removed from the other performers, so that she becomes unreachable – but also alone. In a discussion on the mobilization of security, Peter Adey suggests that ‘verticality implies security from the insecurities below’ (Adey, 2010, 58). When Routledge occupies the position at the very top of the rope, she appears ‘detached’ - physically, emotionally and metaphorically - from her own disturbed thoughts and from the frame of action happening around her.

This literal removal, the ability to occupy an ‘aloof’ position in vertical space, is a quality unique to aerial disciplines such as rope, silks, Chinese pole and straps. Thus, the aerial rope offers not only a means of presenting visual spectacle and physical skill, but also a practical means of accessing otherwise unreachable sections of performance space. The normally impressive spectacle enabled by the rope choreography is also offset by Routledge’s counting aloud and evident distress, both of which humanize her. Thus, the audience is no longer drawn to the technical skill level in the rope performance, or the aerial choreography itself, but rather are invested in the performer’s manifestations of pain, the signs of struggle whilst overwhelmed. She is at the same time competent and incompetent, fragile and strong, the resulting effect a spectacle that places ‘the vulnerable body at its heart’ (Kershaw, 2003, 608). Kershaw asserts that this kind of spectacle is valuably deconstructive, yet not necessarily hopeful in its message if ‘the spectators’ participation is gained through the continuous death of the subject’ (Kershaw, 2003, 608). In other words, the humanity of the subject can be revealed to the audience by exposing the limits of free will and agency and the constraining force of past experiences. In the example of *Box of Frogs*, Routledge’s identity is repeatedly reaffirmed by her spiralling experience of pain and loss of control. In this instance, Routledge gains the emotional investment of the audience via the exhibition of pain. Although, as spectators we understand that the pain belongs to Weaver and not to Routledge, it is through the aerial rope, as performed by Routledge, that the pain is able to be physicalized. In this way, Routledge presents fragments of both herself and Weaver in unison; ‘the high level of reality embodied in’ the ‘physical actions’ of the aerial rope choreography ‘naturally creates this heightened intensity’ and enables both Routledge and Weaver’s emotional sensibilities to be integrated (Lievens, 2015). It is through presenting these emotional responses in conjunction with aerial choreography that Routledge enacts a ‘destabilization of signification through spectacle’ and in doing this reinforces ‘a sense of the commonly human’ (Kershaw, 2003, 610). Paradoxically, aerial work itself is not demonstrative of what is ‘commonly human’, however, what this performance demonstrates is that removing the human from the

horizontalism of the everyday has the capacity to highlight ‘commonly human’ traits (2003). While the aerial sequence demands a level of technical virtuosity, the performance invites the audience to witness an alternative virtuosity manifest in Routledge’s ‘multi-tasking’ ability to undertake a labour-intensive, physical skill whilst simultaneously maintaining the rhythmically steady count. Her virtuosity is demonstrative of the physical labor that goes into creating the aerial spectacle, but by showing the effort she invests into counting and climbing, this also functions to deconstruct the image.

The second aerial rope act in *Box of Frogs* depicts the further disintegration of Routledge’s mental health. Her psychological decline takes focus and is made apparent to the audience when she becomes disproportionately angry with Chris Patfield whilst he is juggling and shouts at him, saying: ‘The juggling is doing my head in!’ (Stumble Dance Circus, 2012) Following this, the stage becomes filled with the other performers, of whom are all invested in their own personal activities, which are collectively creating a great deal of noise. Routledge tries, to no avail, to stop them all from making noise and becomes more and more disturbed and angry as the sound on stage builds. Finally overwhelmed by the sounds around her, Routledge covers her face and begins to scream, begging the performers to be quiet. The others are oblivious to Routledge’s pleas and only increase the noise, which also spreads to fill different parts of the stage. Routledge screams again but this time everybody hears her: ‘Please can everybody shut up for one minute?!’ (Stumble Dance Circus, 2012). There is a moment of silence as Routledge descends the rope and begins to count, again in an attempt to calm herself down. However, this time it does not work and she begins to howl in frustration and at the same time ascend the rope using a series of hiplock climbs<sup>9</sup> as a drum roll begins, reflecting her growing emotional tension. This leads to a five-minute rope act whereby Routledge repeatedly attempts to try to gain self-control by counting, but fails and falls into fits of rage

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<sup>9</sup> See index of aerial choreography

and distress. At times the efforts to count disintegrate into unintelligible phrases, which the performer delivers as a stream of babbling. Throughout the act, the drums build and recede, mirroring the emotional register and at times growing so loud they drown out her shouts with inconsistent rhythmic patterns. On several occasions, Routledge wraps the end of rope around her body so that there is no longer any connection between herself and the ground. She repeatedly ascends and descends and, at one point, twitches and flails erratically at the bottom of the rope in a fetal position. Descending one final time, using propeller rolls<sup>10</sup>, Routledge ends up lying on the floor facing the ceiling. When she eventually peels herself off the floor, looking dishevelled, the audience applaud. At this point it is clear that the applause is not for a performance that has delivered beauty, technical prowess and spectacle, but rather comes as an act of solidarity and awe for the perseverance, the rawness, demonstrated by the performer. Within more conventional circus settings, aerial and other circus artists are, for the most part, applauded in accordance with their demonstration of high physical achievement, the objective of such performances being ‘success’ over ‘failure’. In this instance, by contrast, it is Routledge’s exhaustion and ‘failure’ that has become not only the defining aspect of the performance, but its ironic success. The audience applause is a bittersweet acknowledgement that Routledge’s success comes from her undoing. What is more, it is through the applause that the audience are able to demonstrate empathic engagement with Routledge, to acknowledge a connection both with the performer and, to a degree, with the pain of her onstage persona. By prioritising the communication of failure and pain over conventional aerial aesthetics of finesse, the act has insisted that as audience we become fully involved in her frustration and exhaustion and in the process gain some insight into the experience of living with bipolar disorder. The scene enacts the ‘mixed state’, as Cheney described it, a combination of ‘hopelessness, fear, self-loathing, despair – all the classic notes of depression’ with some of ‘the least desirable aspects of mania’ (Cheney, 2011). In *Box of Frogs*’ second rope act, as described, the combination of depressive hopelessness along with the energy of rage is

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<sup>10</sup> See index of aerial choreography

presented through the synergy of rope choreography, the sound of Routledge's voice and the roll of drums. Routledge's rope work predominantly consists of climbs and descents, together with some locked positions which enable her to sit at the top or bottom of the rope. Her repetition of particular movements, such as rolls and climbs, gives the sense of entrapment in a way of thinking and feeling. Her body is mostly inverted or closed round the rope, as if she is protecting herself from the world, and at one point as noted, she adopts the fetal position. The vertical rope becomes a visual barometer for anger and depression, with the repetitious cycle of ascent and descent an allegory for the relentlessness of the mania and depression of bipolar disorder. Thus, in *Box of Frogs* the aerial rope is appropriated to communicate themes fundamental to the piece and not for the facilitation and presentation of 'tricks'. This marks out the production distinctively from a tradition of circus-theatre in which the circus dimension has too often added 'gloss', rather than contributing meaningfully at the level of narrative content. For as Zaccarini has argued, in 'keeping up' with a 'cultural climate where multidisciplinary was becoming more and more common', the circus genre 'began to fly before it could walk' in offering formal brilliance, but little thematic or critical content (Zaccarini, 2013, 20). However, in Routledge's two aerial rope acts, the theatrical meaning is not '*applied* as an afterthought'; there is no separation between physicality and theatricality, since Routledge's physicality *is* the theatricality and is integral to its meanings (Zaccarini, 2013, 21). The narrative of the show does not break, in other words, in order to make way for a moment of circus spectacle, but rather the narrative is reliant on the distinctive qualities Routledge's performance on the rope has to offer: fundamentally, the labour of her ascent and descent, and the manner in which she can wrap it around her and use it to detach herself from the ground. The audience also recognises that the same rope that holds her up and supports her could instead be used in ultimate self-destruction, as reviewer Nicola Rayner comments:

On the rope, Routledge plunges down like the sudden and swift descent of a mood or evokes a hanging body in a haunting reminder of where bipolar can lead. (Rayner, 2012)

While *Box of Frogs* does not explicitly suggest an impulse to the suicidal, the potential for this is apparent. Such thoughts are a symptom of bipolar disorder, and recent studies into the link between bipolar disorder and suicide have shown that the estimated ‘risk of suicide in bipolar patients’ is ‘20–30 times higher than that of the general population’ (Tidemalm *et al.* 2014). As with any symptom of bipolar disorder, this does not mean that it will affect everyone with the condition. However, in the context of *Box of Frogs* the possibility of suicide subtly presents itself, economically, by the presence of the aerial rope. This notion of the rope being used as a potential means of death by suicide subverts the traditional circus staging of ‘the human being in a relationship of supremacy and dominance over the objects in the ring’, which is discussed in Chapter 1 (Lievens, 2015). In such traditional narratives ‘circus is both the promise of tragedy and the attempt to escape from tragedy’ and therefore ‘this makes the circus performer into a tragic hero’ (Lievens, 2015). However, in *Box of Frogs* the rope offers the potential for Routledge’s ultimate defeat and hence, a tragedy without a heroic return. In opposition to neoliberal representations of success and achievement, we, the audience, are presented with the option of failure.

Elsewhere in *Box of Frogs* themes of failure and hopelessness are juxtaposed with spectacle, but on the vertical plane via acrobatics. Lauren Hendry’s and Kaveh Rahnama’s duo acrobatics scene presents Hendry as the flyer who communicates to the audience her feelings of self-loathing and uselessness, all the time whilst performing the act. Throughout the scene Rahnama is silent, directing his focus to basing and supporting Hendry. The use of verticality contrasts in this instance with that of aerial rope, as the period in which Hendry occupies vertical space is fleeting in comparison with Routledge’s time in the air. Unlike Routledge, Hendry returns to the horizontal plane each time through the act of falling, rather than

via a more controlled descent using the resistance of the rope. The act of being only temporarily ‘suspended’ in air, rather than supported by a more permanent structure such as that of the rope, underlines for the audience a sense of Hendry’s fragility, by contrast with the frustration and anger of Routledge. What is more, in recognising the possibility of Hendry falling, or not being caught by Rahnama, we also understand the delicate balance that is necessary in order to navigate the world when suffering from depression. Prior to this point in the show, Hendry runs around excitedly, with ‘very little care for her own safety’, seemingly in a state of mania (Morreaux, 2012). In the view of Weaver, Hendry ends ‘up offering us probably the most human moment of the show, which is where all of her fearlessness and all her confidence just drains away from her’ (Morreaux, 2012). In between and whilst executing a series of acrobatic feats such as handstands, balances and somersaults, Hendry lists the multiple reasons why she thinks she is without value:

I’m unattractive... I don’t deserve respect...I’m basically useless... I make the wrong decisions...

I’m a coward. (Stumble Dance Circus, 2012)

The line ‘I’m a coward’ is delivered immediately before Hendry does a back somersault landing on the shoulders of Rahnama. The powerfully ironic juxtaposition of text and somersault further serves to demonstrate the complexity of depression and the self-perception of those who have it. When explaining how she initially envisaged *Box of Frogs*, Weaver has stated that she wanted ‘to make circus into a cartoon character and drawn on the colour and the energy and the excitement and the risk taking and the vanity’, so that all this could then be turned ‘on its head’ (Morreaux, 2012). The duo act makes painfully clear the nature of a state of mind in which the sufferer is blind to their own worth. This is emphasised further by the self-deprecating monologue that conveys the pressure to achieve and ‘self-perfect’, aspirational terms dictated by a neoliberal economy as necessary if one is to be a well-rounded, ‘valuable’

member of society: 'I'm dull and I'm boring and I can't make any interesting conversation...I try really hard to please people, but I never manage.' (Stumble Dance Circus, 2012). The coupling of Hendry's monologue with her virtuosic acrobatics directly signals the gap between real experience and social expectations. The 'spectacle' of the acrobatics 'presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned' (Debord, 2002, 9). In this instance, Hendry sets, for herself, and then demonstrates, a standard that she can never live up to. The scene presents the paradox of an individual who is highly capable in their physical abilities but who has no belief in herself.

Other recent circus-theatre works that have also employed aerial disciplines in order to explore themes around mental illness and mental health include *Smoke and Mirrors* (2015) by The Ricochet Project and *Birdy* (2014) by Osborne & What. *Smoke and Mirrors* is a live, duo, circus-theatre show which, although not explicitly about mental illness, addresses feelings of isolation, mental fragility and the need for human connection within a neoliberal capitalist society. The work is entirely non-verbal, with the exception of a recording of Charlie Chaplin's final speech from 'The Great Dictator' (1940), which is played during the final aerial scene. Performed and devised by Laura Stokes and Cohdi Harrell, *Smoke and Mirrors* primarily employs aerial disciplines trapeze and double corde<sup>11</sup>, in addition to physical theatre, dance and ground-based acrobatics. The aerial choreography in *Smoke and Mirrors* is primarily used to convey feelings of: frustration, through repetitious and cyclical choreography; isolation, via the juxtaposition and separation of Harrell and Stokes' bodies on the vertical and horizontal planes; and human connection, during the final aerial scene, where Harrell and Stokes perform a duet together on double corde. Within the duet, Harrell and Stokes, both topless and wearing identical white underwear, perform an intimate encounter whereby they in turn support, hold, balance on and cling to one another. During *Smoke and Mirrors* the verticality of the double corde enables the performers to be detached from the ground,

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<sup>11</sup> Two ropes rigged from the same point, which can be performed in a similar way to aerial silks.

existing in the 'middle' of otherwise empty darkened space, thus reinforcing ideas of disconnection. It is through Stokes and Harrell's physical connection in this 'middle space', and after their estrangement from one another for the majority of the work, that we as an audience are reminded that the source of Debord's spectacle 'is born from the world's loss of unity' (Debord, 1983, 15). In counter to this 'loss of unity' the verticality of the double corde is intended as a space, outside of the representation that dominates the everyday, for Stokes and Harrell's characters to find authentic human connection (Debord, 2002, 15). However, arguably the raw tenderness of Stokes and Harrell's emotional connection with each other and the audience in *Smoke and Mirrors*, is at times, masked by the sophistication and finesse of their choreographic language. Throughout the work, although the physical qualities of the aerial choreography varies, it always retains an overall sense of control and intention. In the case of *Smoke and Mirrors*, control is a relevant part of the overall narrative and also the identity of the characters played by Harrell and Stokes, who throughout the work emotionally and physically explore beyond the restrictions of their everyday corporate existence. Arguably, this aesthetic of control, which is a common and often necessary trait in aerial work, limits the diversity of emotions that can be presented via the choreography. Also, in *Smoke and Mirrors* the control embedded in the aerial choreography prevents a more pronounced juxtaposition between the imposed social restrictions presented at the beginning of the show, and the exposure of human fragility in the other scenes. The grace and assurance exhibited by Stokes and Harrell stands in stark contrast to the ugliness, discomfort and apparent lack of control presented by Routledge in *Box of Frogs*. Whereas the aerial rope scenes in *Box of Frogs* challenge and undermine what Helen Stoddart describes as the 'ingenuity, power and beauty of the human', Stokes and Harrell's performances serve to embody these qualities (Stoddart, 2000, 95). However, conversely, in *Smoke and Mirrors* this power and beauty is also subverted in the final aerial scene when the two aerialists cling to each other at the top of the double corde. As Lievens articulates, this moment of aerial choreography 'focuses on a real meeting of bodies' that happens in 'real time' (Lievens, 2015). The genuine intimacy that is created

through the closeness of their near naked bodies, acts in contradiction to the strength and control executed by their trained aerial bodies.

In Osborne & What's *Birdy* the aerial scenes also respond to themes of restriction and control, as they represent an escape from Birdy's existence in a psychiatric hospital, either in the form of dream or memory scenes. Both the aerial rope and counterweighted bungee-sling, performed by Joe Garcia in his role as Birdy, are used to embody Birdy's dreams/realities of flying. Like *Box of Frogs*, *Birdy* incorporates a selection of different circus disciplines such as Chinese pole, trick bike, aerial rope and counterweighted bungee-sling into a theatrical narrative. However, in *Box of Frogs* the use of circus performance and disciplines is actively acknowledged by the performer/characters on stage, whereas in *Birdy* they are not and instead become a metaphorical embodiment of topics or ideas embedded within the narrative. For example, in a scene where Birdy is about to undergo a clinical procedure the performance of aerial bungee-harness becomes a metaphor for psychological escapism where he lives out his fantasies of being a bird. Garcia performs using a single point harness that is fastened around his hips and is attached to a drop-in line in the beginning of the scene. The transition from 'real life', as depicted in the psychiatric ward, to Birdy's fantasy, affords him physical abilities such as flight and the capacity to use his arms and hands like bird wings, which are otherwise restrained behind his back. In their respective analyses of the history of aerial performance, both Helen Stoddart and Peta Tait make reference to the 'metaphors of flight' that still continue to be associated with aerial performance (Stoddart, 2000, 169). Tait also refers to the 'implied bird-like naturalness' of aerialists, a quality that is nonetheless reflected in the creation of *Birdy* (Tait, 2005, 35). As I discuss in Chapter 1, such notions of flight are often associated with ideas of freedom and an exemption from natural laws such as gravity. However, in *Birdy's* bungee-harness scene, metaphors of flight are simultaneously presented and deconstructed, as notions of freedom are complicated with those of frustration and despair. Garcia's first attempts at flight are not

successful: he flaps his arms in vain but does not become airborne and it is only through his frustrated attempts that he eventually flies. Kershaw asserts that ‘pain is a means of achieving an image of human transcendence’; Birdy’s pain, although not physically visible, is communicated through his insular body language and through the narrative of the performance (Kershaw, 2003, 607- 608). For the majority of the show, Birdy is depicted as psychologically ill and damaged and it is only when he is flying that he is presented as complete. The aerial performance in this instance offers an ‘incomplete spectacle’, with Birdy adopting the role of a broken superman at its centre. In response to body suspension performances by Stelarc (1970s-1980s), Kershaw states that ‘suspensions force a new deconstruction of the human through their juxtaposition of the body in pain and the image of flying’ (Kershaw, 2003, 607). To this effect, Garcia, by juxtaposing psychological bodily pain with flying, offers audiences a complicated notion of the mentally ill human subject. The spatial freedoms offered by the aerial bungee-harness choreography allows for Birdy’s inner monologue and dreams to be presented within a context where the rules and restrictions of everyday movement do not apply.

### Conclusion

Through all of the works discussed in this chapter, it is made clear that presenting the human-ness of any mental health condition works to counter the problematic separation between ‘ill’ and ‘well’. Audiences can see that there is not a clean divide between mental illness and mental stability, but instead a murky and unclear area, which many will have crossed into, or a ‘spectrum’ from which no one is excluded. We understand that ‘there is no singular body or site but rather a constellation of permeable selves and realities’ (Harpin, 2014, 211). In this way, acknowledging the multiplicity of possibilities surrounding mental health works to undermine stigma and the damaging narratives of mental illness. Some audience members will identify with the feelings or situations experienced by performers on the stage, further extending ‘ownership’ of mental illness and rendering this knowable and accessible. That process of

stigmatisation has the powerful effect of making the condition more socially acceptable for discussion, and as already argued is key to combating discrimination. Indeed, as Weaver stated in interview: ‘If I want people to take anything away from *Box of Frogs*, it will be the desire to discuss it.’ (Morreaux, 2012). *Box of Frogs* as a live performance, rather than performance on film, means that audiences are in literal terms placed in a position where they are sharing an experience, and in the process challenging the ‘global social practice’ of the separation of ‘reality and image’ (Debord, 1983, 8). Additionally, by being channelled through live performance, the implications of bipolar disorder as a condition are not mediated via a screen or a process of video editing, as they would be with a television soap or drama. While the live theatre form still necessarily ‘mediates’ its content, its immediacy and intimacy forcefully exposes qualities of representation and brings the experience (perhaps uncomfortably) close. The fact that *Box of Frogs* is a representation of bipolar disorder does not change the empathetic response that audience members might have with the performers on stage. In her book *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists*, Marla Carlson argues that theatrical representations of human pain are able to instigate social change through the way in which they provoke audience responses:

Because pain so powerfully solicits the spectators engagement, aestheticized physical suffering plays a vital role in creating communities of sentiment and consolidating social memory, which in turn shapes the cultural and political realities that cause spectators to respond in different ways at different times. (Carlson, 2010, 2)

In *Box of Frogs*, it is the performers’ ‘aestheticized physical suffering’, in Carlson’s terms, which allows the audience to access some of the complexities attached to bipolar disorder, as experienced by Weaver (2010, 2). Carlson goes on to note that there is a risk that ‘such representations become too fully aesthetic, turning atrocity into a source of pleasure while forgetting the material suffering of those who are thus

represented' (Carlson, 2010, 34). Carlson's comment raises questions about how far the representation of an issue is separated from the lived experience at its source. Weaver both directed and wrote *Box of Frogs*, using her own life as stimulus for its material; this implies that, in this case at least, 'representation' of the subject-matter engaged with still remains tangibly connected to the immediacy of experience.

One must also question *how* the subject-matter of a performance work is framed and presented. If a challenging or 'ugly' issue is rendered aesthetically pleasing in order to make it palatable for audiences, does this potentially sever artistic 'treatment' from its source? Disability justice advocate Mia Mingus proposes that by presenting ugliness you open up avenues for deeper levels of connection

Ugliness is a pathway to intimacy. You can't have intimacy without trust, and you can't have trust without vulnerability. In order to be vulnerable, you have to reveal parts of yourself that are dismissed as capital-U Ugly. (ALOK, 2018)

Mingus's statement is illuminating with reference to the 'ugliness' consciously staged by *Box of Frogs*, which both engages audiences in an intimate portrayal of bipolar disorder and also builds a relationship of trust between performer and audience. By enacting different aspects of her at times 'ugly' bipolar experience, Weaver leaves herself vulnerable to the audience and their considerations of her and her illness. This in itself becomes an intimate act, within which she trusts the audience not only to engage with, but empathize with, her 'ugliness'. What is more, the portrayal of 'ugliness' also serves to counter damagingly separative neoliberal definitions of success, achievement and beauty. Mingus adds: 'When I think about intimacy and its connections to beauty, I feel like it's more connected to ugliness than beauty' (ALOK, 2018). Presenting ugliness within a society that places so much value on aesthetics is in itself a

radical act. Consciously embracing ugliness means opening oneself up to social criticism, which in turn means exhibiting one's vulnerabilities, and so making space for intimacy. Mingus's critical dissection of beauty, and replacement of this with the alternative term, implicitly rejects neoliberal ideas of self-improvement and instead embraces the whole spectrum of human abilities and diversities. Hence, the demonstration of human vulnerability in *Box of Frogs* becomes a mode of resistance and counteraction to neoliberal notions of perfection. In Judith Butler's essay 'Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitions and Street Politics', Butler too discusses ways in which bodies can be used to 'perform resistance through vulnerability' and 'precarity' (Butler, 2014, 99). Butler argues that 'when political struggles emerge [...] they are mobilizing precarity, and even sometimes quite deliberately mobilizing the public exposure of the body' (Butler, 2014, 115). It is this strategy of 'public exposure', as outlined by Butler, which Weaver adopts within *Box of Frogs* by assembling 'the bodies of those deemed "disposable" or "ungrievable" [...] into public view' (Butler, 2014, 117). Spectacles such as that staged in *Box of Frogs* communicate the message, to cite Butler, that "'we have not slipped quietly into the shadows of public life: we have not become the glaring absence that structures your public life'" (Butler, 2014, 117). *Box of Frogs* draws attention to the presence and prevalence of mental illness and, in so doing, resists expectations of wholeness prescribed by capitalist multimedia. What is more, Butler's analysis allows for vulnerability and resistance to exist side by side, as she insists that 'it is not that vulnerability is converted into resistance, at which point strength triumphs over vulnerability. Strength is not quite the opposite of vulnerability' (Butler, 2014, 116). The validity of this observation is implicitly demonstrated in *Box of Frogs*, where we see that the presence of accomplished, strength-fuelled aerial acrobatics does not negate the vulnerability of the performers on stage, but works instead to complicate their individual abilities and identities as mentally unwell subjects.

Aerial work, as a discipline that has its roots in circus, inherently risks making the subject of mental illness into what Harpin describes as ‘titillating spectacle’ (Harpin, 2014, 2). The virtuosity and ‘showmanship’ of the discipline endangers exploiting serious subject-matter in its motivation to inspire wonder and admiration from audiences; as Peta Tait rightly observes, ‘the suspension of a body seems to heighten its aesthetic qualities and beauty’ (Tait, 2005, 1). However, this is not the case in *Box of Frogs*, as I have argued, since here the aerial rope work exposes and becomes a tool with which to express the unpalatable and painful qualities of the bipolar condition. In this way, the production does not spectacularize or distract from the disorder it treats, but rather provides an opportunity for audiences to witness its manifestations in their rawness. In the case of *Box of Frogs*, *Smoke and Mirrors*, and *Birdy*, the aerial spectacles within the works risk ‘reinforcing the very forces’ they aim ‘to subvert’ (Kershaw, 2003, 610). Particularly in the case of *Smoke and Mirrors*, the images of beauty and wonder inspired by the aerial choreography, risk aligning themselves with neoliberal representations of wholeness and perfection, without contradiction. Despite attempts to humanize the aerial performer, aerial work is still not considered commonplace. With this in mind, it may seem counterintuitive and self-defeating that theatrical works which strive to present mental illness as an everyday occurrence should do so via the performance of physically ‘exceptional’ people. The physical limits of aerial choreography also pose issues in serving the narrative or concept of a work, in that the aerialist is always caught up in an endless cycle of resisting and working with gravity. Arguably, so is the ground-based performer, but they have the added knowledge of tried and tested pedestrian movement to add to their repertoire. Over time, aerial performers have devised a series of choreographic locks, holds, balances and rolls, which work to utilize or resist gravity, and which now form the basis for a universal aerial language. If aerialists do not continuously work to find new choreographic material that deviates from what has already been established, they risk repeating the same movement language across various theatrical or performance works. This repetition, and the context in which it is placed, is often what limits the creative and

communicative potential of aerial choreography. Notwithstanding, as this thesis argues, it is possible to use established physical aerial and circus language in order to serve an idea or concept. As I have demonstrated, in *Box of Frogs*, Weaver utilizes the circus language of spectacle as presented by human circus bodies as a means for communicating her experience of mental illness. In using the bodies of circus artists, instead of her own presence on stage, Weaver risked reducing the performers to ‘mere anonymous’ bodies which appear ‘meaningless and without subjectivity’ (Lievens, 2015). However, in making and presenting *Box of Frogs* the performers and Weaver become collectively engaged in a process whereby the experiences of the performers are entwined with Weaver’s. As a viewer, the impression is not that the performers are only vessels present to serve Weaver’s agenda, but rather that they are individual people who are invested in the subject matter that the work engages with. What is more, by involving the use of both vertical and horizontal space within *Box of Frogs* Weaver demonstrates that she is ‘engaged with notions of language and space in’ her ‘articulations of madness’ (Harpin, 2014, 211). Without the employment of other multi-disciplined circus artists, including aerialists, she would not have been able to utilize space or spatial arrangement to the same extent. What is particularly effective in *Box of Frogs* is the manner in which the aerial choreography in conjunction with the onstage drama unfolds in ‘real-time’ giving the audience the sense that they are sharing an authentic experience. Both in *Birdy* and in *Smoke and Mirrors* the aerial work is presented either as part of a dream sequence, or as outside the context of the everyday, making the human subject(s) less accessible for the audience. Additionally, the aerial work in both *Birdy* and *Smoke and Mirrors* is accompanied by pre-recorded music, which has the double effect of placing the performance ‘out’ of ‘real time’ and placing it in musical time, and, also impacting the speed and musicality of Garcia, Stokes and Harrell’s choreography. In *Box of Frogs*, Routledge’s second rope act is accompanied by live drumming, the performance of which is dictated by her actions, as opposed to her following the lead of the percussion. In this way, her actions and spoken text become the central and leading force of the scene, rather than a visual accompaniment to the music. The liveness of

the action in tandem with the aerial choreography in *Box of Frogs*, provides an insight into bipolar disorder without imposing cures, improvements or changes to the characters on the stage. The interruption and deconstruction of the aerial spectacle serves as a physical metaphor for the challenging of neoliberal representation, and thus for critiquing narratives surrounding mental illness and wellness.

# Chapter 3

## Subject/Object: The Solo Female Performer

This chapter examines a series of female-led solo performance works and acts, in all of which, I argue, the artist-performers actively position themselves as both subject and object. I consider *My Stories, Your Emails* (2010) by Ursula Martinez, as well as an earlier Martinez piece, *Hanky Panky* (2000), that prompted the artist to create *My Stories...; iblues*, by Irena Purschke, which I examine alongside the ‘balloon popping scene’ performed by Claire Marshall as part of Forced Entertainment’s confrontational theatre show *First Night* (2001); finally I discuss *Site* (2015), a site-specific intervention created and enacted by artist Poppy Jackson in the financial district of East London. These works have in common their engagement with, and simultaneously a challenge to, the conventions of overtly spectacular forms such as aerial performance and cabaret; in Jackson’s case, this critical address moves beyond the stage or indoor arena to unsettle the connotations of grandiose architectural structures. Within this discussion, the relationship between spectacle and objectification (and specifically, the objectification of the female subject) is particularly pertinent. As I argue throughout this thesis, spectacle, self-evidently the defining factor of spectacular performance, has long been related to the notion of visual consumption and thus, also, objectification. Debord argues that ‘behind the glitter of spectacular distractions [...] advanced forms of commodity consumption have seemingly multiplied the variety of roles and objects to choose from’ (Debord, 1983, 28). In this way, even abstract components such as time, labor or experiences can be commodified, in addition to those that are more tangible. According to Debord, the creation and saturation of images, formed in detachment from ‘real life’, results in increased consumption. Detachment thus informs objectification as it widens the gap between the spectator and what they are seeing. During the process of detachment, something or someone becomes stripped of their inherent meaning(s), which

transforms it, or their status, from subject to object. Once something has been made subject to objectification, it becomes more palatable for consumption. In their journal article 'Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption', A. Fuat Firat and Alladi Venkatesh argue that

Symbols have no particular origins and can be manipulated via a system of signs. In this process, the consumer becomes a consumer of symbol/spectacle, for that is how objects are presented to her/him. In this symbolic/spectacular universe, at a time when the market rules, consumers look for meanings and experiences while marketers produce the spectacles. (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995, 251)

'Symbols', as described here, and in the context of this thesis, can be equated to the notion of objects. Hence, the symbol as having 'no particular origin' is the object that has been stripped of its meaning and consequently exploited to communicate new meanings (1995). This is particularly relevant for a critical consideration of the work of female performers, practices of objectification and the use of formal spectacle. This chapter analyses the different artistic strategies for creating and disrupting spectacle, and spectacle's 'system of signs', through performance strategies employed by Purschke, Martinez, Marshall and Jackson: I propose that these artists successfully find ways to occupy a 'double space' as both subject and object, that this occupation in turn draws attention to the symbolic ordering of sex and gender, and that it provides opportunities for resistance and bodily reclamation (1995). The consciously 'self-objectifying' position adopted by Purschke, Martinez, Marshall and Jackson, is a paradoxical one that can be related to and compared with Kershaw's deconstructive spectacles, which operate by undermining different facets 'of the "real"' (Kershaw, 2003, 595). The artists considered here have created such deconstructive spectacles, I argue, in the form of works which encourage audiences to question perceptions of the female body and the processes by which this is objectified and valued. For

Kershaw, ‘human mortality immortalizes itself in the moment of spectacle, and the spectator sees this paradoxical process as it is happening’ (Kershaw, 2003, 599). Theoretically, by becoming thus ‘immortalized’ a person appears to relinquish human qualities such as sentience and subjective feeling, and this in turn shifts their identity position from subject to object. But what is gained in terms of ‘super-human’ skills or qualities can also in turn be used to oppress or to dehumanize. As discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis, notions of immortalization and the ‘superhuman’ are perpetuated within both traditional and contemporary circus, in some genres of aerial work, and in other performance genres that historically champion spectacular or virtuosic performance such as classical music and ballet. This chapter is predominantly concerned with how such spectacular forms can be deployed critically in order to challenge social constructions and expectations of female identity, interrogating the extent to which these four performance works by Martinez, Purschke, Marshall and Jackson shape a feminist critique of female identity, aesthetics and sexuality.

The works discussed here evidence an active engagement with the female body, female sexuality and the gaze in their use of different spectacular performance forms including striptease, burlesque, aerial-rope, and site-specific performance. In addition to the individual commentaries on female sexuality and representation that the performances of Martinez, Purschke, Marshall and Jackson provide, collectively these works enable a critique of spectacular or virtuosic performance and how such performance is connected to, and has sometimes seemed to foster, objectification. In an article discussing variety theatre in East Germany in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, Andy Machals argues that

in Marxist thought, when a body moves onstage, whether in dance, in acrobatics, or specialty acts, a performer's movement is physical labour and her body is her means of production. The product of a handstand performer's labour is the objectification of that labour. In other words, the

handstand, as both labour and object, is consumed by onlookers while the performer labours it forth. (Machals, 2017, 59-60)

If we adopt Machals' Marxist perspective, then we understand that the more labour an artist contributes to a performance, then the more virtuosic, and thus more objectifiable, it becomes. Exposing the labour behind a performance is commonly considered as something that would undercut virtuosity, rather than reinforce it. However, by presenting something as effortless, rather than laborious, arguably an artist is demonstrating the exertion of more labour; the production of *seemingly* effortless spectacle is in fact more laborious (given the effort involved in concealing labour) and is therefore more virtuosic. Thus, within a capitalist labour system, the more apparently effortless a virtuosic or spectacular performance is, the greater its worth, and commodifiability, as an object-product. When a woman is considered within the same capitalist labour system, her object-product value depends on her ability to meet the aesthetic beauty standards of femininity set by the industry, and also on her ability to be sexually appealing to a (predominantly) male audience. Thus, within this system, the more sexually appealing she is, the more value she has. When a female artist undertakes virtuosic or spectacular performance, the potential for her to be objectified effectively doubles: first, her gender identity as a woman already engenders objectification, and second, her object worth is multiplied by the additional presentation of virtuosity.

Spectacles of virtuosity and spectacles of femininity are linked by the aesthetic of effortlessness. By the same means that the labour of virtuosity is meant to appear effortless, the labour of femininity is 'ideally' disguised to appear natural and therefore effortless. In their article 'The body natural and the body unnatural: Beauty work and aging' Laura Hurd Clarke and Meredith Griffin examine women's attitudes towards 'natural and unnatural aging in relation to the use of beauty work interventions' such as 'anti-wrinkle creams, cosmetics, hair dyes, cosmetic surgeries, and non-surgical cosmetic procedures'

(Clarke & Griffin, 2007, 187). Clarke and Griffin explore the notion of the 'natural' body versus the 'unmodified' body and draw on a series of interviews with women aged 50-70 (2007, 189). According to the authors, in interview the 'majority of the women' rejected the notion of the unmodified body, claiming that 'beauty modification' such as 'cosmetics, anti-wrinkle creams, and hair dyes were a natural part of achieving and maintaining femininity'. However, when presented with celebrities who had undergone extensive cosmetic surgery such as Joan Rivers and Michael Jackson, many of the women interviewed claimed that these examples had taken 'beauty work interventions too far', to the point of appearing artificial and grotesque (2007, 198). Hence, what we understand from these examples is that, in the context of the feminine aesthetic, 'one must strive for a natural look even while actively resisting natural aging through the employment of various beauty technologies' (2007, 198). An aesthetic of 'naturalness' is in fact characterized by what it is not, 'an obviously and extensively intervened body', which is the product of extensive effort and labour (2007, 198). Such research adds weight to the conclusion that in order for a performance, of whatever order, to stimulate critical reflection upon both spectacular and patriarchal objectification, both the sexual and virtuosic content of that performance requires offsetting, or framing, by some other form of commentary. In *A Choreographer's Handbook*, Jonathan Burrows observes that 'if everything is virtuosic then there's nothing against which to read the virtuosity: it has to be in balance with other modes of engagement' (Burrows, 2010, 76). The 'other modes of engagement' to which Burrows refers are, in this instance, the other modes of performative commentary that both offer subjective perspective and also give a point of reference for the extremes of virtuosity to be measured against (Burrows, 2010, 76). It is in finding and exploiting this equilibrium, I argue, that artists are able to occupy the double-space of subject and object.

Performances that explicitly foreground women's bodies and female sexuality readily give rise to controversy about who such acts are for and whom they empower. According to Kay Siebler, one

argument against performance that is ‘female-centred’ yet lacks any sort of feminist commentary, is that this fosters ‘narratives that create narrow and problematic representations of female sexuality’, reinforcing ‘the patriarchal myth that female sexuality can find “empowerment through commodification”’ (Siebler, 2015, 563). Siebler insists on the importance of incorporating commentary within such performance, and compares two strands of burlesque performance, ‘neo-burlesque’ and ‘underground burlesque’, and the different ways in which they present female identity and sexuality. Siebler argues:

Neo-burlesque performers replicate the patriarchal images of women, femininity, and female sexuality instead of challenging them; they position themselves as sex objects for the male gaze. The audience members – be they male or female – must adopt the male gaze to enjoy the show, viewing the women as objects of sexual desire, posing, stripping, and performing for the audience’s gratification. (Siebler, 2015, 566)

Siebler’s account also suggests that female neo-burlesque performers are presented as commodities in the manner in which they ‘replicate the patriarchal images of women’, which thus reinforces their status as object (Siebler, 2015, 566). However, Siebler’s analysis of underground burlesque, by contrast, perceives its performers as active, empowered subjects able to expose the complexities of female identity constructions:

Underground burlesque is a radical off-shoot of neo-burlesque where camp/parody/politics is center stage and the performer subverts narratives of female sexuality, often in shocking ways. These disruptions of traditional scripts demand that the audience think about the complexities of desire, sexuality, and identity, often through a feminist lens. In underground burlesque, the audience is not allowed to consume the performance without disruption. (Siebler, 2015, 566)

Siebler's comparison of the two different categories of burlesque performance provides a useful model from which to consider not only burlesque performance, but female-centred spectacular performance work more generally. Siebler's account of the disruption of the 'traditional' striptease found in underground burlesque suggests an implicit parallel with Kershaw's 'spectacles of deconstruction', with regard to the creation of critical, spectacle-based performance which works to interrupt and complicate its own virtuosic components (Kershaw, 2003, 595). As I argue in this chapter, the 'disruptions of traditional scripts' evident in performances by Martinez, Purschke, Marshall and Jackson allow these artists to undermine or 'subvert' patriarchal notions of female identity and sexuality, and also of spectacle itself.

#### Spectacle and Self-Commentary

*My Stories, Your Emails* (2010) is a one-hour, solo performance lecture written and performed by Ursula Martinez. It was directed by Mark Whitelaw and commissioned by Barbicanbite 10 and QueerUpNorth International Festival. Its basis is the juxtaposition of a collection of stories from Martinez's personal life and history, along with the body of emails Martinez received from strangers after a video of her renowned cabaret act *Hanky Panky* (first performed in 2000 at an early Duckie event in Birmingham) was leaked onto the internet in 2006 without her consent. *Hanky Panky* is a 'choreographed magic strip-tease' which 'uses a simple disappearing handkerchief at its core' (Martinez, 2017). During *My Stories, Your Emails*, in addition to showing the leaked video footage of *Hanky Panky*, Martinez makes various textual and implicit aesthetic references to the act, including wearing the same suit-costume and hairstyle as is seen in the video. The promotional images for *My Stories, Your Emails* include two photographs of Martinez naked, in both suggestively covering her genitals and her nipples, using her right hand and notebook or

diary in the first, and her left hand and laptop in the other<sup>12</sup>. Martinez's blurb for *My Stories, Your Emails* describes the show as a combination of

spoken word, live art, character, comedy and stand-up' in a 'comical and uncompromising exploration of identity, fame, obsession, censorship, loneliness, sex, human failure, the internet... and what happens when your private parts go public! (Martinez, 2017)

This text, in addition to describing the performance genres included in the work, complicates Martinez's self-image, before the piece is even performed. The juxtaposition of the text and the promotional images reflect different facets of experience that Martinez has brought together in order to create the show - a combination of subjective and objective experiences and perspectives. The combination of these - her own performance personas and stories, alongside the voices of strangers - allows Martinez to interweave different narratives relating to her family, personal life, and professional interactions, thus enabling the audience to experience multiple modes of perceiving the artist and her experiences. By presenting the leaked video footage of *Hanky Panky* as part of the performance lecture - as if in quotation marks - rather than performing the act live, Martinez actively creates a distinction between herself as 'subject' in *My Stories, Your Emails* and herself as 'object' in *Hanky Panky*. However, since *Hanky Panky*, as an act in itself, already blurs the distinction between subject and object, its quoted presence in *My Stories, Your Emails* adds an additional layer of complication to the notion of Martinez as 'object'. *Hanky Panky* creates, as Dahlia Schweitzer argues, a 'postmodern spectacle that reflects and subverts dominant cultural paradigms' reflecting an audience's 'anticipation of the ideal versus apprehension of the real', by simultaneously presenting both the performance of the conceptual model body, at the same time as that of the live body (Schweitzer, 2000, 65-66). It is through the combination of humour and eroticism, I suggest,

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<sup>12</sup> See link for promotional image (Home, 2009)  
<https://homemcr.org/production/ursula-martinez-in-my-stories-your-emails-2009-05-12/>

that Martinez unpicks the relationship between the ‘real’ and ‘ideal’ (2000, 66). What is more, the humour in *My Stories, Your Emails* undermines the ‘conceptual distance’ required to maintain the fantasy associated with Martinez as object (2000, 67). The use of distance becomes an underlying theme in *My Stories, Your Emails*, in relation to the physical and metaphorical space between Martinez, her performed self, the audience and the men who email her.

In *Hanky Panky*, Martinez, by integrating the disappearing handkerchief conjuring trick with a striptease, juxtaposes humour, erotic spectacle and physical virtuosity. At the beginning of the act, Martinez walks onto the stage clothed in a suit jacket and pencil skirt. She pulls a red handkerchief out of her breast pocket, shows it to the audience and proceeds to stuff it into her fist. She waves her hands and opens her fist to reveal that the handkerchief has gone, before it reappears in another jacket pocket. Throughout the performance, the handkerchief continues to disappear and reappear on Martinez’s person, whilst she removes different layers of clothing until she is entirely naked. Martinez disappears the handkerchief one last time only to retrieve it from her vagina, or, in the artist’s own words, ‘a truly magical place’ (Martinez, 2017). Martinez’s performance persona for *Hanky Panky* is cheekily casual yet simultaneously authoritative. At moments she feigns confusion with regard to the possible location of the red handkerchief, and then winks and raises her eyebrows to the audience as she pulls it out of its various locations on her person throughout the performance. Before the final disappearing act of *Hanky Panky*, when Martinez appears to ‘magic’ the handkerchief to reappear from inside her vagina, she struts across the stage area naked, occasionally pausing to thrust her pelvis in time to the music. During this final part of the act Martinez comes into close contact with the audience, gleefully bumping the side of her hips into the shoulder of a spectator and also thrusting her crotch at the eye-level of audience members. By connecting with the audience physically and unexpectedly in this way, she parodies conventional and more prescriptive striptease narratives that present the female performer as the object of male (or

patriarchal) desire; instead of aiming to gratify the audience, she looks to them as potential co-conspirators in her mischief and not as scopic voyeurs. In a discussion of Martinez's work alongside *Trilogy* by artist Nic Green (a show which also presents its creator's nakedness on stage critically), Sarah Gorman argues that Martinez's 'nudity breaks with feminist theories popular in the 1990s, which argued that the female form could never escape the symbolic logic of phallogentrism' (Gorman, 2013, 48). Pursuing Gorman's analysis of Green, I argue that in actively thrusting her genitals towards members of the audience, Martinez actively rejects the phallogentric notion of the 'castrated' woman, instead demonstrating that she is intact (Mulvey, 1989, 14). What is more, by touching or coming close to members of the audience whilst naked, Martinez confronts social taboos with regard to how nudity - in particular female nudity - is experienced, as Western culture primarily enforces expectation that nudity that occurs within a public context is for sexual consumption; as Rob Cover argues, this has meant that nudity 'has been inseparable from sex and sexuality, and has hence been located adjacent to the indecent, the obscene and the immoral' (Cover, 2003, 55). For Cover, the sexualization of nudity is a result of the 'sexualization of the public sphere' which 'destabilizes the contexts in which non-sexual nakedness and gazing have been legitimated in modernity' (Cover, 2003, 55). Naked bodies, male or female, in their entirety, are rarely wholly depicted or represented within the public realm and public spaces, but rather are alluded to. Advertisements in particular, will present a naked body, but without exhibiting certain body parts, such as genitalia or female nipples, in order to subscribe to standards of social or legal 'acceptability'. Pornography and many genres of stripping or striptease, which arguably still constitute a part of the public sphere, but not necessarily public space, frequently *do* show entire female and male bodies without censorship. However, such acts are still widely considered taboo or transgressive, and, as argued by Schweitzer, 'the general public often assumes strippers to be women of low character, low intelligence, and low moral standards' (Schweitzer, 2000, 66-67). Stripping and pornography are reliant on the creation of fantasy by maintaining both physical and 'conceptual distance', either via a screen or

through watching a performance on stage (2000, 67). By bringing her naked body into close contact with members of the audience in *Hanky Panky*, Martinez quite literally breaks the distance necessary for maintaining the fantasy version of herself. Schweitzer contends that

the stripper's performance depends on the implication of distance and inaccessibility. At close range, the stripper ceases to be a strictly visual happening. Less distance means greater intimacy, and intimacy is the least of what this show is about. (Schweitzer, 2000, 67)

Hence, if we adopt Schweitzer's view that at 'close range, the stripper ceases to be a strictly visual happening', then in the context of *Hanky Panky*, Martinez's close contact with the audience reinforces her status as subject, rather than object. What is more, the intimacy that is created through close contact also works to counter objectification, as it connects audiences to Martinez, her body and her persona as a real person, rather than as a fantasy.

In *My Stories, Your Emails* Martinez builds up performative layers, including the ones already carefully embedded in *Hanky Panky*, which allow her to adopt the 'doubled' position I have described. She separates the 'voices' within the work into two categories: 'my stories', which are her own reflections and stories; and 'your emails', which are the stories and reflections of others. The opening section of the show makes that distinction explicit in its physical structure, as Martinez explains: 'My stories will happen over here [*stage right*] and your emails will happen over here [*stage left*]'. Whereas 'My Stories' are told by Martinez in the first person, for 'Your Emails' the artist reads aloud texts she has been sent often adopting the positions and imagined accents of the senders. The act of appropriative narration serves to position Martinez as both object and subject, since she is giving voice to the process of her own objectification

whilst also allowing space for her own critical reflection. This strategy of deliberate self-objectification is also used elsewhere in the show. At one point, Martinez addresses the audience:

Maybe you were drawn to the slightly saucy publicity shot or maybe you have seen some of my work online and basically you're here tonight to make sure you see a bit of pussy. A bit of hot pussy. Middle-aged but hot nonetheless. (Martinez, 2014)

By assuring the audience that her 'pussy' will be 'middle aged but hot nonetheless', she is encouraging them to regard her as both sexual object and critical subject. She is offering an 'object' of sexual desire, but with a disclaimer that it does not necessarily meet social and cultural desires for youthful femininity. Much as in *Hanky Panky*, Martinez acknowledges both the sexualising frame through which her image and the work might be read. However, unlike *Hanky Panky*, *My Stories, Your Emails* allows Martinez to address issues of sexual content and context verbally as well as through performance physicality. The additional layer of verbal commentary further complicates Martinez's role and relationship to the audience, as objectification is frequently associated with a literal 'voicelessness'. Further, Martinez's self-narration interposes an even sharper distance between herself as subject and her role as 'object', since the latter becomes a 'character' whose existence is communicated via text and image. Martinez's address to the audience in *My Stories, Your Emails* oscillates between objective description and subjective experience:

I have a magic striptease act called 'Hanky Panky'. In this act I take all my clothes off and make a red silk handkerchief disappear. (Martinez, 2014)

Martinez delivers this statement in a business-like manner, which she then breaks with a look to the audience, which tells them that she knows that this is funny and ensures that they have understood the intentional ‘naughtiness’ of her statement. In this way, she is both subject and object: object when ‘simply’ referencing her own striptease act, but subject when she breaks her sincere demeanour and becomes the one who ‘knows’ that she is doing something ‘naughty’. Schweitzer argues how ‘the stripper’ must always remain just out of reach, just out of ‘real’. (Schweitzer, 2000, 67). By looking at the audience – rather than remaining merely the one ‘looked at’ - Martinez is cementing her presence in the ‘real’ in Schweitzer’s terms. The artist acknowledges the performance of her ‘unreal’ character, however she also presents a paradox, in that she is both the ‘real’ *and* ‘unreal’ characters within her show. In *My Stories, Your Emails* the deviation between subject and object becomes intertwined with the fluctuation between unreal and real, and hence the ‘unreal’ object, becomes the ‘real’ subject. At one point Martinez tells the audience that *Hanky Panky*

has always been a reliable showstopper. However, one time I was doing the act and the audience didn’t seem quite as delighted as they usually were. It wasn’t until the end when I realised that I had a big fat piece of toilet paper sticking out of my arse (Martinez, 2014)

Martinez’ inclusion in her performance material of (or reference to) scenarios that would conventionally be considered taboo or embarrassing, work to counter the virtuosity of the magic tricks and the manner in which she is sexually objectified via the emails featured in *My Stories, Your Emails*. It is another strategy for reducing the distance between herself, the audience and the men who have emailed her. The leaked video of *Hanky Panky* made Martinez available for public viewing without discretion, and Martinez’s reference to abject bodily functions, amongst several things, serves to offset her commodifiability and objectification.

In an interview with ABC Arts Martinez explains how *My Stories, Your Emails* was ‘a little bit about gaining control again, of the control that I had lost from the act being on the internet’ (ABC Arts, 2010). Effectively, *My Stories, Your Emails* was a way for Martinez to present her own testimony, after what she felt was a personal violation. When *Hanky Panky* was released onto the internet it became embedded on a number of different websites and online platforms, without Martinez’s consent, meaning that she had no control over who viewed it or how it was presented. Hence, her body was reproduced in a way that objectified her and removed her agency as an active subject. In interview, Martinez asserts that

I had protected my act from going on the internet for many years. I could have put it on my own website years before but I had always chosen not to. [...] Whilst I was performing the act live I was always in control of the context in which I perform it, so if somebody asked me to do a strip club I could say no. If someone asked me to do a ‘men-only’ event I could say no. (ABC Arts, 2010)

The context in which the video of *Hanky Panky* is viewed is pertinent in terms of how Martinez’s nudity is perceived. When taken out of the live cabaret context and placed on the internet the nudity in *Hanky Panky* was perceived by some as sexual and erotic. Martinez emphasises that *Hanky Panky*

was never really designed to be associated with eroticism [...]. For me the act was funny and entertaining and cheeky and yeah provocative [...]. I had never associated it with eroticism and I don’t feel erotic when I’m performing it. I feel funny. (ABC Arts, 2010)

Martinez's comment demonstrates the importance of her agency as an artist: her intentions for the work were skewed when the work was presented not in its intended context. Another fundamental issue with the video of *Hanky Panky* being on the internet was that the power to determine frequency of watching was transferred to the viewer: the image of her body became controlled by them and not by Martinez. In effect, the image of her was at the disposal of the viewer. Martinez argues that one of the primary concerns with being able to watch the video multiple times is that it feeds into 'obsession and a fantasy' (ABC Arts, 2010). By continually 'pressing play' the viewer reduces Martinez to a 'symbol' or object that is without origin (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995, 251). The viewer, as the consumer, looks to the symbol 'for meanings and experiences' and thus uses these to build a fantasy (1995). It is this process that encouraged some viewers to perceive Martinez in a heightened sexual context, and to treat her as an object or canvas onto which they could superimpose their fantasies. Able continually to press play, the viewer is 'controlling' the fantasy, and 'thereby creating the illusion that the fantasy is a response' to them (Schweitzer, 2000, 69). This in turn means that the viewer is able to develop a 'personal' relationship between themselves and the object of their fantasies, without having to obtain the consent of the original subject. If the original subject or artist, in this case Martinez, is able to control the context and dissemination of their performance, then they are also able to control their relationship to the viewer. Whilst *Hanky Panky* was exclusively performed within a live cabaret or similar it could only be seen once during any given event or programme. The ephemerality of such events means that once performed, it has finished and cannot be replayed; thus the window within which to 'build a fantasy' is much shorter. Additionally, *Hanky Panky* was typically programmed alongside a number of other potentially subversive or entertaining acts, which lessened the focus on Martinez. Thus, the live context makes it far harder for the viewer to objectify the artist-performer. In *My Stories, Your Emails* the audience are confronted with the disjunction between the live performing body and the video representation. Martinez's live presence on stage further magnifies the physical and conceptual distance between her video representation and the

audience. In this manner, the audience are presented with two ways of perceiving the female subject, firstly as a live and active subject, and secondly, as a form of representation that can be manipulated at will.

*My Stories, Your Emails*, Martinez employs what Laura Vitis and Fairleigh Gilmour have described as ‘critical witnessing’ (Vitis & Gilmour, 2016, 342). ‘Critical witnessing’ refers to the exposure of ‘issues and events that have historically been hidden from view, within public spheres that have muted women’s voices’ (Vitis & Gilmour, 2016, 342). In *My Stories, Your Emails* the audience are provided with an insight into the sheer volume of emails Martinez has received without any prior arrangement or consent by her. In this way, the audience are made to bear ‘witness to [...] the ubiquity of men’s online harassment of women’, which enable them ‘to view and through viewing vicariously experience harassment as an ongoing practice rather than a one-off incident’ (Vitis & Gilmour, 2016, 342). Although *My Stories, Your Emails* is presented via Martinez’s subjective experiences, these experiences are universally representative of how women are treated and the sort of behaviour they are subjected to in online spaces. The work is made and presented as entertainment, but it is also a form of subversive resistance that uses shaming and satire. It demonstrates Martinez’s refusal to accept a submissive role, within the context of both the video leak and in relation to the unsolicited emails and pictures. Martinez’s inclusion in the show of the written and visual material sent to her by men on the internet sparked considerable controversy amongst audiences and critics. In the view of some, Martinez was unethical in the way that she presented the men who contacted her and also opened them up to ridicule. One argument fostered by Rhoda Koeing, Ian Shuttleworth and Matt Trueman was that Martinez was not entitled to counter the inappropriate behaviour of the men who emailed her, with what, they perceived as, another wrongdoing. Trueman asserts:

These men may well do Martinez wrong, but does one wrong turn really deserve another?

Martinez is clearly not driven by a thirst for vengeance, but at the centre of *My Stories, Your Emails* is a nasty streak, not dissimilar to the impulse to share viral quirks and spread shame. (Trueman, 2010)

Trueman's comment suggests that Martinez's degradation and belittlement of the men featured in *My Stories, Your Emails* was in itself a parallel form of bullying. Ian Shuttleworth in the *Financial Times* likewise argues that 'her own intimacies are hers to peddle; other people's, even if sent to her unsolicited, are not' (Shuttleworth, 2010). Rhoda Koeing published a cutting review of *My Stories, Your Emails* in the *Independent*, saying: 'I wish that none of my money was being spent making people feel superior to men who seek sex on the internet' (Koeing, 2010). However, the criticisms of Koeing, Trueman and Shuttleworth overlook the discrimination and social inequality that women are subjected to as a social group. As Vitis and Gilmour state, 'research indicates that while men and women both experience online harassment, women [...] are disproportionately the victims of online sexual harassment' (Vitis & Gilmour, 2016, 337). The quoted arguments against Martinez come from a place that assumes men and women are from equal social categories, and thus I suggest trivialize her experiences at the same time as they criticize her means of retelling them. Unconsidered in their judgments is the sense of entitlement exhibited by the men who email Martinez. In an article titled 'Unsolicited dick pics: Erotica, exhibitionism or entitlement?', Rebecca Hayes and Molly Dragiewicz argue that men's 'understanding of sexual entitlement' is a product of 'enduring patriarchal cultural norms' (Hayes & Dragiewicz, 2018, 115). Such norms encourage the view that men are entitled to sex, and therefore, are entitled to act on their sexual urges. Hence, the men who email Martinez with sexual propositions and images view it as their right to

do so. This is evident in *My Stories, Your Emails*, for example when Martinez reads aloud an email from ‘Eric’ who sends her a picture of his erect penis:

Dear Ursula thanks for your reply. First I thought of answering your request for a photo by sending you a picture of my nineteen centimetre erect cock, as a result of watching your video and me myself being a bit of an exhibitionist. (City of Women, 2014)

‘Eric’s’ presumption that Martinez would want to see his penis is reflective of broader social and heteronormative perspectives that perceive this kind of behaviour as not only acceptable but biologically innate. For Hayes and Dragiewicz, ‘one key aspect of patriarchal heterosexuality that deserves critical attention and may be relevant to understanding men’s distribution of unsolicited dick pics is entitlement’ (Hayes & Dragiewicz, 2018, 115). This entitlement also presumes that women will *want* to see pictures of men’s penises, in order to fulfill their own ‘castrated’ lacking (Mulvey, 1989, 14). Despite the serious nature of the issues surrounding consent in *My Stories, Your Emails*, the primary strategy Martinez employs is humour. The use of humour is criticised by Trueman, who acknowledges that although *My Stories, Your Emails* ‘can be riotously funny [...] Martinez never shakes off the sense that we are invited to laugh at’ the men featured in the show (Trueman, 2010). For Trueman, the use of humour is something which instead of drawing attention to the issues within the work, only serves to make a mockery of the men featured. However, humour has in many instances been proven to be an intelligent and discerning way of presenting both serious and complex subject matter. Vitis and Gilmour consider that

the transformative potential of humour and its ability to engage stereotypes provides opportunities to go beyond naming and witnessing harassment to critiquing the narratives that underpin the societal tolerance of harassing behaviour. (Vitis & Gilmour, 2016, 344)

By presenting the emails she has received, Martinez tests the audiences' comfort levels with regard to such behaviours, using comedy to 'critique the narratives' that endorse or overlook it. Trueman is concerned that 'despite sharing their names, numbers and mugshots, Martinez treats these men as anonymous humans in much the same way that they do her' (Trueman, 2010). Yet the men who have emailed Martinez objectify her, whereas Martinez in return does not treat them in the 'same way' but rather shames and exposes them for their objectification of her. The negative critical response to *My Stories, Your Emails* raises a wider question regarding women's legitimate agency and power in online spaces. Had the men approached Martinez in person, would their advances be considered differently? Trueman also questions 'to what extent has Martinez bought the attention on herself through exhibitionism' (Trueman, 2010). Trueman's query, in correlation with recent rape and sexual harassment blaming slogans, in effect states that 'she' – Martinez – was on some level 'asking for it'. Such logic implies that Martinez is the one who is responsible for the behaviour of these men, not the men themselves. Hence, such comments further reinstate and draw attention to the gap in gender equality and wider social problems regarding consent. Martinez's performance, although undeniably and 'spectacularly' subversive, provides an effective commentary on the objectification of female subjects and the complex nature of societal power relations, raising important questions about personal testimony, its vulnerability but also its potential, when 'exposed' to wider society.

### Empty Spectacles and the Refusal of Labour

*iblués* (2008) is a five-minute cabaret act created by Irena Purschke, in which the artist performs aerial rope choreography whilst intermittently smoking a cigarette. Purschke intentionally plays with her audience, challenging the expectation that she will perform 'tricks' by taking pauses in between sections

of aerial rope choreography in order to smoke. Her attitude throughout the act appears nonchalant and aloof, and she undertakes both the smoking of the cigarette and the execution of the aerial rope material in an unhurried, task-like manner. Purschke's costume for the performance is a blue leatherette cropped bralette, blue leggings and black leather gaiters; her short blond hair is styled in spikes, recalling the anarchy-punk aesthetic of contemporary circus company Archaos. *iblues* begins with Purschke holding onto the rope, in an inverted straddle position with bent legs. As the introductory notes of the music are heard, she straightens first one leg and then the other, gently rolling her ankle joints as if she is preparing her body for some considerable exertion. She turns her head from side to side, in order to look at both feet, a semi-parodic action which suggests that she is checking their placement and functioning. These gestures with her head, legs and feet are the 'unofficial' beginning to the act. The first line of the melody is Purschke's cue to begin her aerial sequence, which starts without any flourishes and in a notably 'casual' manner. The slow drawl of the music is echoed by the aerial choreography, which, although not exactly 'in time', reflects the musical tempo and seems to respond to its motifs and crescendi. Throughout *iblues*, Purschke maintains this nonchalant, even cheeky demeanour, pausing in between movements to look or smile at the audience. Her cultivated persona is overtly blasé, which is placed in tension with her performance of 'daring' or spectacular rope choreography. She executes large drops, the impact of which is deliberately undercut by Purschke smoking, assuming poses that present her as relaxed, off duty, looking at the audience, and, in one instance, lazily swinging the tail of the rope in a circular motion. At one point, Purschke hangs from one hand whilst flicking the ash from her cigarette with the other. These non-functional movements combine to project an image of ease and indifference, which challenges the preconceived notion that aerial work is physically demanding for the performer. As discussed, aerial acts predominantly aim to conceal physical exertion, as indeed does *iblues*, but typically do so in a manner that effectively underlines the virtuosity of the performer; by contrast, Purschke appears so flagrantly, even comically 'at ease' in performing that she seems implicitly to resist the labour involved. This

performance stance is evidently paradoxical, since it has the double effect of both evidencing Purschke's physical competency, but also her refusal to make capital of this. Purschke consciously appropriates and subverts the expectations an audience might have of an aerial rope cabaret act, which is a display of acrobatic tricks and virtuosic displays; yet by exaggeratedly denying or withholding her virtuosic performance-labour, Purschke communicates her control over both the extent and the conditions of her existence as a labour-product. Hence, Purschke positions herself as both object and subject, in that she *does* give the audience the virtuosity that the context and form of the piece leads them to expect, whilst also, as they are forced to acknowledge, withholding all that she is capable of. In this manner, Purschke is flirting with or teasing the audience, communicating the message that yes, they can 'have' her, but not all of her.

Although *iblues* does not deal explicitly with sex or sexuality by means of thematic content, the musical accompaniment and costuming within the act both work to encourage audiences to perceive Purschke at least partly in that context. The pre-recorded saxophone-led music accompanying Purschke, for example, recalls the raunchy, blues-style music played in strip clubs during the 1960s; however, although the pace of Purschke's performance matches its tempo, the physicality of *iblues* does not match its sleaze. Instead, the music is used I suggest to invite the 'idea' of the performer's objectification, so that even pedestrian movements, such as smoking or dusting off her feet, are framed from that perspective. Purschke becomes a provocateur, offering herself up as object-to-be-looked-at, whilst undermining this framework with both mundane performance tasks and the delivery of choreographic spectacle at a leisurely pace that she herself determines. Like Martinez in *Hanky Panky*, Purschke plays a 'game' with the audience, looking at them and communicating her acknowledgement of them looking at her. This way of looking at the audience – accepting, yet also challenging the public gaze - shifts the power relationship between

audience and performer, I suggest, such that she becomes the active subject *looking at* the audience, rather than the passive object who is being *looked at* by them. The cigarette Purschke smokes throughout, and at one point clenches between her teeth, is itself is a symbol of her position as subject and object, as it is both a part of her experience (rather than the spectators'), but also potentially connotes a compromised, unfree position undermined by 'addiction'. The cigarette itself carries this double meaning, since our contemporary awareness of the health damage these cause is part of a much longer history in which smoking was originally a symbol of freedom and agency. During the early twentieth century, Edward Bernays, a pioneer in public relations, successfully conducted an experiment in the US to see if he could get women to start smoking. The documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis notes that in this period

There was a taboo against women smoking and one of [Bernays'] early clients, George Hill, the president of the American Tobacco Corporation, asked Bernays to find a way of breaking it. A.A. Brill was one of the first psychoanalysts in America and for a large fee he told Bernays that cigarettes were a symbol of the penis and of male sexual power. He told Bernays that if he could find a way to connect cigarettes with the idea of challenging male power, then women would smoke because then they would have their own penises. Every year New York held an Easter day parade, to which thousands came and Bernays decided to stage an event there. He persuaded a group of rich debutantes to hide cigarettes under their clothes. Then they were to join the parade and at a given signal from him they were to light up the cigarettes dramatically. Bernays then informed the press that he had heard that a group of suffragettes were preparing to protest by lighting up what they called 'torches of freedom.' (JustAdamCurtis, 2016, my transcription)

The manner in which Bernays exploited the women's resistance movement in order to sell cigarettes evidently undermines narratives of freedom associated with cigarettes. The incident illustrates (an)other

example of where women have been manipulated and deceived in their quest for gender equality, in order to serve the needs of corporate interest. By getting women to smoke, Bernays seemed to demonstrate that women, and their bodies, were the property of men in power, and thus available for to be moulded and experimented on. Regardless of the manner in which women were exploited by Bernays, smoking shifted culturally from being a solely male activity to something that was practised by men and women alike and to an extent became an expression of female independence. With regard to *ibluess*, if, as described by Curtis, cigarettes might be read as a symbolic representation of a man's penis, then Purschke demonstrates her ability to bite it, by clenching it between her teeth as she climbs the rope. Further, the detached manner in which Purschke treats the cigarette implies that she is 'using' it – whether it be cigarette, or phallus - but she does not 'need' it. Purschke's oscillation between sucking and biting the cigarette is another innuendo 'tease' to the audience, whereby she performs the desire to please them, yet also to reject them.

The strategies of controlled pace and the withholding of virtuosic-labour that are adopted in *ibluess* are also evident in Claire Marshall's balloon act in Forced Entertainment's show *First Night* (2001). *First Night* is, according to the company themselves:

A kind of disastrous vaudeville. In it, eight performers stand before the audience in a line of dazzling smiles, dead eyes, sequined lycra, tottering heels and loud check suits. *First Night* begins with a grand welcome, but soon disintegrates into dark predictions of the future, psychotic escapology acts, unexpected dances and unhinged show-biz anecdotes. (Forced Entertainment, 2001)

If *First Night* is, as stated, a 'disastrous vaudeville', we should already be alert to the show's refusal to deliver the light, comedic and spectacular variety performance usually associated with vaudeville form. In *First Night* the performers do offer the audience different 'variety acts', yet these are seemingly not designed to please or even entertain. At one point in the show there is a 'psychic act' in which members of the audience are informed of the different ways in which they will die:

"You," says one of the performers, pointing to a man in the front row, "will die of kidney cancer." Another person is singled out. "You will die in a car crash." A few people titter nervously. Soon the air is thick with predicted deaths. No one is safe. The audience freezes. The rules have been broken. Theatre isn't meant to be like this. The audience is supposed to be looked after, not abused. (Gardner, 2009)

Forced Entertainment are known for acknowledging and then breaking the conventions of the dramatic theatre. Lyn Gardner notes in their work 'an obsession with theatre' but simultaneously 'an apparent aversion to it' (Gardner, 2009). Artistic Director Tim Etchells comments on the kind of work Forced Entertainment make and of their devising process:

I suppose we've been attracted to the same overly casual behaviour on the stage or overly messy behaviour on the stage, or an aggression of being on the stage, or different textures really that give the performance a sense that it is slightly inappropriate [...] Things that might come from [...] the idea of a performance that's gone wrong, or from an amateur performance where the performers are a bit shaky or as if the performers don't care actually, or as if the performers are so enthusiastic about what they are doing that they're in a different state than the rest of the audience. In *First Night* we worked with that in Claire's 'balloon dance'. We used this texture of

a kind of indifference from Claire, which has this very comical effect when you set it next to the sort of ambitions to [...] create something with the dance she has with the balloons. (Forced Entertainment, 2015, my transcription)

Marshall's 'balloon dance' begins with her standing on a chair, centre stage, wearing a dress that is concealed by the numerous balloons that are pinned to it, so that only her head, arms and legs are visible. She reaches inside her dress, retrieves a cigarette and a lighter, and continues to light and smoke the cigarette. Marshall proceeds to pop each balloon, gradually revealing her dress. The act of popping balloons is the primary focus, or task, within this 'act', and when they are all popped, the sequence ends without crescendo or climax. The performance is accompanied by sleazy blues-style music similar to that employed by Purschke in *ibluess* and Marshall's demeanour and performance pace echo Purschke's too. The task of popping all the balloons is punctuated by Marshall smoking, looking at the balloons and looking at the audience. Marshall establishes an action-based 'choreography' that follows a simple, repetitive pattern: *Looks at balloon - looks at audience - looks at balloon - pops balloon - smokes cigarette - looks at audience.*

In Purschke's and Marshall's acts the aerial choreography and popping of balloons respectively operate to fulfil the central role of 'the trick' and thus deliver the 'virtuosic' content. If a trick is 'a feat of dexterity or skill, intended to surprise or amuse', as the Oxford English Dictionary defines it, its success - particularly in the context of circus or magic - is typically measured by its virtuosic capacity to appear unachievable or beyond the laws that govern the everyday. An effective trick is expected to inspire feelings of incredulity or amazement in its spectators. Typically, when watching a circus show or performance in a circus-based discipline - even in contemporary circus contexts not wholly premised on 'tricks' - audiences expect to see that which is 'normally' unachievable, or at the very least something

which is out of the ordinary. However, whilst Purschke's trick demonstrates a spectacular skill well beyond the physical abilities of the majority, Marshall presents a 'trick' that is, in actuality, a simple action that could potentially be performed by almost anyone. Writing on the subject of virtuosity, Jonathan Burrows suggests that although 'the audience enjoys skill' and moreover virtuosity, 'anybody doing what they want to do, and doing it well, appears skillful' (Burrows, 2010, 77). What Burrows points to is the importance of delivery of the skill, and in the case of Marshall, the non-delivery of the non-skill. Marshall does not engage with or recreate any of the anticipation that is usually associated with the delivery of risky tricks or physical displays of virtuosity whereby the performer communicates with the audience that they are 'poised on the brink of success or failure' and prior to the delivery of each trick 'suspends time in a moment of in-breath' (Burrows, 2010, 76). Instead, the manner in which she pops the balloons is presented as banal and underwhelming. In addition, Marshall, like Purschke, constructs a persona that appears indifferent both to the audience and the performance situation. Although she performs a sort of striptease, Marshall conveys no desire to please the audience, to entertain them, or to provide visual or sexual gratification. Delivery of this 'non-trick' without flourish or charm has the effect of critically reframing what might be audience expectations of a female artist performing a more conventional burlesque disrobing. Whereas Purschke exercises her control over the production and delivery of her virtuosic labour-value, Marshall goes a step further, by not delivering any physical virtuosity at any point. Marshall's labour-value is determined purely by her presence on stage and her engagement with the staged reference to striptease. Her non-trick serves to highlight the division between her 'body as the artist's means of production and the objectification of her labour' (Machals, 2003, 61). In other words, the performance is structured to communicate Marshall's non-compliance with her objectification, whilst acknowledging that she - as a female performer - cannot but be subject to it.

## Real-life Spectacle

Poppy Jackson's work *Site* is a durational performance for which Jackson, whilst naked, climbs and straddles a roof gable, in London's financial district, for eight hours. *Site* was presented as part of Spill Festival in 2015 at Toynbee Studios in East London. In *Site*, Jackson treats and positions her body almost as if it were a living statue. By sitting astride the gable with her legs open, she creates a visual image that conveys the vulnerability and potential objectification of the female body even whilst her position of height and dominance signals this as a place of power. As its title suggests, *Site* is a site-specific work and its display of virtuosity and engagement with spectacle is managed through the precarity of her body's location rather than any inherent physical prowess. By establishing a double space for the controlling subject *that is also* the presented object, *Site* actively works to challenge both spatial and social limitations of the female body. Unlike the other works discussed in this chapter, the virtuosic labour-value of *Site* is predominantly demonstrated through the extended duration of her performance (eight hours over two days), coupled with the discomforting exposure affected by her nakedness. As with Purschke's *iblues*, an integral facet of Jackson's work is an engagement with vertical space and height, but here Jackson frames her objectification architecturally. In a television interview with London Live, Jackson explained the motivation behind *Site*:

It was about the female body claiming space in the city and a celebration of the female body, but on its own terms[...] The female body that we usually see on these platforms, in the media, is a kind of more sexualised female body, often advertising, trying to sell something, it's kind of a commodification of female sexuality. (Jackson, Vimeo, 2015)

The manner in which women are represented in advertising, including in billboard advertising, has been widely critiqued not only in academic terms and professional journalism but through popular

commentary. In her book *Can't Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel*, Jean Kilbourne argues that 'sex in advertising [...] dehumanizes and objectifies people, especially women' (Kilbourne, 2000, 271). Her analysis explores the frequency with which advertising strategies adopt and perpetuate patriarchal narratives which foreground the removal of women's agency and communication, presenting them as objects of sexual desire. Kilbourne observes that, in the world of advertising, 'men are encouraged to never take no for an answer', since 'ad after ad implies that girls and women don't really mean "no" when they say it, that women are only teasing when they resist men's advances' (2000, 273). Similarly, in their essay 'The Impact of Violence Against Women in Advertisements', Michael L. Capella, Ronald Paul Hill, Justine M. Rapp and Jeremy Kees critique the ways in which consent is communicated in mainstream advertising and argue that 'in a broader sense, sexualized violence is about abusing power and encompasses a range of offenses that involve nonconsenting victims' (Capella, Hill, Rapp & Kees, 2014, 38). The images of women used in billboard campaigns, as Lauren Rosewarne observes, are regularly presented as 'sexualised, decorative and "consumable"'; Rosewarne's argument is that since 'sexist advertising imagery works to imbue public space with masculine concepts of sexuality [...] such an environment may prove exclusive for women' (2007, 14; 17). Further, since billboard advertising does not allow women to speak, their representation in this context is also silent and, typically, passive. While men featured in billboard advertising have no literal voice either, the statistical frequency of female representation above male suggests that 'men have been granted the controlling role of voyeur' (Rosewarne, 2007, 19). During *Site*, Jackson also does not speak; however, she controls her own representation by self-placing her body at height and setting the terms for the performance duration. In other words, Jackson, although in one sense voiceless, is still able to communicate her subjectivity, agency and sentience.

*Site* challenges restrictions placed on the body, questioning the mechanisms of sexual objectification by aligning the female body with ‘commanding’ architectural structures. The performance took place within view of London’s financial district, unquestionably a male-dominated locus of the city renowned for being densely populated with skyscrapers and other tall buildings. The area of the capital was described by Grayson Perry, in the Channel 4 documentary *All Man, Rational Man* (2016), as a ‘great big encampment of great big glass cocks poking up in the city’ (Grayson Perry: *All Man, Rational Man*, 2016). Perry is not alone in reading high-rise buildings as a physical manifestation of capitalist industries, representative of imposed phallic and patriarchal dominance within the urban environment. For example, architectural historian William J. R. Curtis refers to the phallocentrism of such building developments as ‘Viagra urbanism’, suggesting that ‘a pornography of eroticised skylines’ has thus been created within cities (cited in Curtis, 2012). In his essay ‘Architecture and Sexuality: The Politics of Gendered Space’, Gerard Lico argues that

The underrepresentation of women’s body and experience in the spatial structures creates a possible setting for subordination and exploitation. This spatial marginalization of women in the architectural appropriation of space sustains the unquestioned operation of patriarchal power in the process of framing human activities, movement, bodily practice, and gendered relations.

(Lico, 2001, 1)

Following the logic of Lico’s reading, Jackson’s imposition of her naked body in this locale *and* on top of a building constitutes a powerful intervention into vertical space that implicitly challenged the neighbouring ‘masculine’ architecture. Her self-presentation straddling the roof apex showed her as open and vulnerable whilst simultaneously demonstrating her daring and powers of endurance. In their article ‘On Dialectics’, Eleanor Massie and Philip Watkinson remark on the experience of watching *Site*:

There was a sense of dominance, as Jackson powerfully exerted her presence on the building. At the same time, the apex of the institution itself was penetrating her shivering body; Jackson appeared to be at the mercy of its late-nineteenth-century architecture and surrounding environment. (Massie & Watkinson, 2016, 1)

The juxtaposition of Jackson's 'dominance' along with her appearing as if 'penetrated' by the building puts forward complicated notions of gender, power and space; here, too, the artist positions herself consciously as both passive object and assertive subject. Unlike the man-made structures of the financial district, Jackson demonstrated a vulnerable 'humanness' both in her occupation of vertical space and in choosing to make her naked body the object of extended and very public gaze. Jackson's positioning of the body high in vertical space makes a reference to both weightless suspension and also to weight and gravitational pull. She creates a paradoxical spectacle, one that exposes her human fragility and simultaneously the ways in which female identity is co-opted and exploited by economic industries.

### Conclusion

As I have shown, all the performances or 'acts' discussed in this chapter work to challenge, or to subvert, patriarchal structures and strategies of dominance. Jackson, Martinez, Purschke and Marshall self-consciously adopt the liminal, actively paradoxical position of both subject and object, assuming conflicting qualities of vulnerability, indifference, power, and agency in their performance personae. Their ability to juxtapose these seemingly incompatible traits – and embrace the tension inherent in that juxtaposition - operates both to deconstruct objectifying narratives of the female subject and also present alternative or potential realities for female identity. Susan Bowers argues that 'the antidote to the male gaze, and one avenue to women reclaiming their own sexuality, is the female gaze: learning to see clearly

for themselves, thus reconstructing traditional male images of women' (Bowers, 1990, 218). However, I would argue that the female gaze is not the *only* countermeasure to the male gaze (see Chapter 1 - Gendered Spectacle), in many instances it may offer an effective mode of opposing objectifying processes, by presenting intimacy, subjectivity and capacity for failure. In the words of Dirse, the female gaze works to 'subvert patriarchal assumptions concerning gender' (Dirse, 2013, 27). As exemplified by the works detailed in this chapter, through the lens of the female gaze women are presented as being in control of their own sexuality and, also, able to exercise their physical, emotional and conceptual agency. Equally relevant to this discussion, particularly in the case of Martinez's work, is the concept of a 'queer gaze' which is likewise able to undermine the constraints of patriarchal gendered ordering, in this case by resisting binary representational categories. In his paper 'The Queer Gaze', Tim Wray argues that 'instead of seeing space as a domain to be surveyed and ordered the queer gaze questions how we are situated in it' (Wray, 2003, 70). Wray goes on to propose that 'ambiguity is perhaps the key identifying feature of queer culture' and that 'looking through the queer gaze we search for these ambiguities' (Wray, 2003, 72). From this perspective, the queer gaze does not attempt to categorize but instead observes and honors the complexities of gender and sexuality which remain undefinable within the dominant patriarchal model.

Lastly, in Martinez's, Marshall's, Purschke's and Jackson's projects, the renegotiation of the performer-spectator relationship opens up and complicates the identity and aesthetics of the female subject: how she should or could be viewed, what is expected from her on stage, and how far she is obliged to comply. Given the necessity that audiences, as well as artists, should confront such questions, it is clear that embedding an implicit or explicit 'commentary' in the performance is crucial. For as Siebler argues:

Without the feminist commentary, engaging the audience with complicated questions regarding sex work, female sexuality, female bodies, and issues of power and control, the performance does little to challenge oppressive views of female sexuality as defined by the patriarchy. The audience needs to understand that there is a subversion of patriarchal female sexuality in the performance and the performer needs to push the audience to interrogate these subversions and representations. (Sieber, 2015, 567)

The *critical* presentation of complex identities and ideas is key in resisting the capitalist commodification of female identity. What I have argued connects the artists discussed here is the manner in which they all work to counter the reproduction of patriarchally constructed identities, sexualities, and aesthetics, through occupying a knowing position as both subject and object, challenging the notion of labour-value in their performances. The communication of subjective experience and testimony further serves to challenge socially constructed narratives and stereotypes surrounding female identity and passivity. Beyond this, the complex ‘acts’ of Jackson, Martinez, Purschke and Marshall deconstruct the relationship between virtuosity or spectacle, and objectification, and in the process demonstrate that disrupting spectacle, or creating paradoxical spectacles, can be a vitally productive strategy in the disruption of objectifying processes.

# Chapter 4

## *My Brain is a Radio:*

### **Aerial Performance and Immersivity in the Neoliberal Age**

*The audience walk into the dimly lit space - what was once the stock room of the old Woolworth's shop building - where a single rope hangs from the ceiling. The two walls and floor of the L-shaped performance space are painted black and are covered in chalked drawings and writing. A few pieces of broken chalk litter the floor. A woman wearing black trousers and a black and white striped t-shirt, enters from round the corner and walks into the middle of the performance space. Her appearance is followed by the words of a soothing voice, the sound of which is projected from the speakers in the corners of the room. 'Listen to my voice...My voice will take you on a journey. My voice will make the world around you disappear.' The woman makes eye contact with individual members of the audience, holding the stare for an uncomfortably long time or until the audience member looks away. She takes deep breaths in accordance with the instructions of the hypnotherapist's guided relaxation. '...In through your nose...and hold it for a moment...before letting all of the air out through your mouth...and again breathing in through your nose...and out through your mouth.' Slowly, the woman turns so that her back is to the audience and begins to climb the rope.*

*My Brain is a Radio* is a site-sympathetic, part-autobiographical exploration of anxiety disorder. By means of performance, this solo work attempts to re-enact the psychological and physical experiences associated with the symptoms of the condition that I have personally experienced, and, simultaneously, to

position the subject of mental illness within the public realm. It evidences the outcome of a practice-as-research project which has explored the following subjects through practical experimentation: the relationships between aerial performance, live art and immersive theatre; methods for representing and exploring the symptoms of anxiety disorder; aerial rope and ground-based choreography, in the context of Ronald Bogue's description of Deleuze's 'transverse pathways'; and repetition on the vertical and horizontal planes (Bogue, 2007, 3). *My Brain is a Radio* was initially developed as a live work for Theatre Delicatessen's 'Horror Souk', an artist development programme culminating in a performance event in the old Woolworth's shop building at The Moor, Sheffield, 31<sup>st</sup> October – 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2014 (see Figure 1). All of the eight pieces of performance shown at 'Horror Souk' were devised in response to the themes of 'horror' and 'immersivity' set by Theatre Delicatessen, and I thus chose to explore these themes within the context of "the horrors that live inside your head". Approximately one year after the live performance was created, I adapted and re-created *My Brain is a Radio* for film, retaining some of the original features of the live work with regard to the sonic accompaniment, costuming and aesthetic.

Figure 1. (15/11/2014 performance space on closing night. Image taken by artist)



At Horror Souk, *My Brain is a Radio* was performed in a two-walled, corner space whose walls and floor acted as a large-scale blackboard (see Figure 1), with the audience situated, either standing or sitting, around its edge. During the thirteen-minute performance the audience were guided by a hypnotherapy script which draws on a selection of my own experiences, in an endeavour to cultivate an intimate understanding of situations encountered through anxiety disorder. Through the hypnotherapy narration, the audience were taken through the initial induction stages of hypnosis (whereby relaxation is achieved and the attention of the audience/patient is focused) and then, by utilizing guided visualization and imagery, through a series of increasingly anxious events. The performance(s) incorporated aerial rope (corde lisse) and improvised ground-based action, including chalked drawings and writing on the walls and floor, as a means of responding to the content of the script and the live audience. The aerial rope material in *My Brain is a Radio* at Horror Souk was both choreographed and improvised in that I assigned

certain movements to crucial moments in the hypnotherapy narrative, whilst leaving space to respond to the live performance situation. It also provided a means of physicalizing for some of the symptoms of, or issues surrounding, anxiety disorder, such as repetitive thoughts, fear, isolation and paranoia. This chapter begins with an overview of Generalised Anxiety Disorder and a discussion of psychological participation within immersive theatre practice. This is followed by a detailed examination of the research process of *My Brain is a Radio*, from its conception through to the final performances at ‘Horror Souk’ and a short overview of its adaptation for film. Within this, I consider the influence of other artistic works that investigate mental health which have offered inspiration in terms of their use of language, physicality and form. I analyse in detail the choreographic research and performance of the aerial rope content within *My Brain is a Radio*, as it provides a means of embodying the themes communicated by the central narrative text of the hypnotherapy script.

#### Experiencing Anxiety Disorder, The Immersive Experience and Psychological Participation

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is described by the British National Health Service (NHS) as ‘a long term condition that causes you to feel anxious about a wide range of situations and issues, rather than one specific event’ (NHS, 2016). The NHS claims that the exact cause of GAD is not ‘fully understood’, although research indicates that factors ranging from chemical imbalances to previous traumatic experiences may carry some weight (NHS, 2016). The experiences of GAD sufferers are all unique to the individual and can include, but are not exclusive to: feelings of panic and fear, insomnia, dizziness, heart palpitations, fluctuations in temperature, numbness or a tingling sensation in parts of the body, muscle tension, indigestion, nausea, feelings of self-consciousness, compulsive behaviours and obsessions with perfectionism (NHS, 2016). However, the symptoms described and explored within *My Brain is a Radio* are derived from my own personal experiences of GAD and therefore will not account for those of all GAD sufferers. According to Anxiety UK, over ‘one in ten people are likely to have a “disabling anxiety

disorder” at some stage in their life’ (Anxiety UK, 2018). Yet despite the prevalence of anxiety disorder, it is something that often remains undiscussed due to the social stigma attached to mental illness. Lesley Henderson observes how stigma attached to mental illness usually ‘relates to attitudes, prejudice and behaviour as well as misconceptions of the danger that people in mental distress represent to others’; stigma is created through a process of social separation, and is ‘thus a product of social interaction between ‘the normal’ and ‘the stigmatized’ (Henderson, 2018, 107). Henderson continues:

During the process of stigmatisation, people with mental illness are distinguished and labelled. Individuals who display certain characteristics which are culturally defined as ‘deviant’ thus become linked to undesirable features (‘labelled’) and open to discrimination. Labelling increases fear and perceptions of dangerousness which in turn increases social distance. (Henderson, 2018, 107)

Reflecting this, *My Brain is a Radio* was intended as an intervention into both stigma surrounding anxiety disorder and processes of social separation relating to mental illness. In sharing some of my experiences of anxiety disorder, I hoped to provide something that audiences could in some way identify with, as well as opening myself and my experiences up for examination in order to counter social fears about mental illness sufferers and the dangers they may be thought to pose to others and in society. *My Brain is a Radio* was structured so that audiences could imagine themselves experiencing some of the symptoms of anxiety disorder via the narration of the hypnotherapist. From the perspective of the audience, this method is not entirely subjective but attempts to guide an imaginative process. The audience are provided with a framework within which they are required to fill in the gaps using their imaginations. By placing the audience in the position of someone who is experiencing anxiety disorder and allowing them to ‘test the validity of the perceived meanings’, the work thus universalizes the condition as something that *anyone*

has the capacity to develop (Kershaw, 2003, 24). The audience is no longer separate from the image or idea of anxiety disorder; they are required to engage with it.

Claire Bishop asserts that in order to counteract the ‘market’s near total saturation of our image repertoire’, ‘there must be an art of action, interfacing with reality, taking steps – however small – ‘to repair the social bond’ (Bishop, 2012, 11). Acknowledging this, *My Brain is a Radio* drew on both fears and real lived experiences occurring as a result of anxiety disorder and how these affect sufferers psychologically, physically and socially. However, the objective of the work was not to recreate experiences but to find methods with which to explore and articulate them. One of the primary issues for this project was the question of how elements on stage could function together in order to communicate feelings of anxiety, discomfort and panic, and the reality of these feelings, as an “immersive” experience. By immersive, I mean an art event that submerges the audience and intends for the audience to, as theatre critic Matt Trueman describes, ‘experience more fully’ (Trueman cited in Machon, 2013, 26). Trueman also suggests that immersive theatre ‘might be well-suited to tackle the extremities of human existence’, given that it positions audiences ‘*in* [sic] situations that we are unlikely to encounter in our everyday lives, rather than just placing them before us’ (Trueman cited from Machon, 2013, 26). In this manner, *My Brain is a Radio* strives to do as Trueman has described, with the exception that it places the audience within a situation that, I argue, is potentially familiar or that may arise at some stage in their lives.

*My Brain is a Radio* does not fit the “traditional” definition of immersive theatre, in that its narrative is not reliant on the *physical* participation of the audience, and also because the separation between audience and performer is clearly defined. According to researcher Josephine Machon, essential aspects of ‘immersive practice’ are first, audience involvement; second, ‘prioritisation of the sensual world’; and third, a consideration of ‘space and place’ (Machon, 2013, 70). Machon argues that a work is only truly

immersive when ‘the audience are integral’ to its ‘*experiential* [sic] heart’ and crucial to ‘form and aesthetic’, which is not the case with *My Brain is a Radio* (2013, 72). However, as with community arts organisation The Space’s description of immersive theatre, the work does blur the lines ‘between performance and life’ and places the audience in the position of being ‘within the environment’ of its narrative, whereby the work is experienced from the inside out (The Space, n.d.). This means of viewing the work from the inside, rather than observing it from the outside, requires a form of psychological participation from audiences that arguably goes beyond simply engaging intellectually or empathetically with the action presented. In *My Brain is a Radio*, audience members are invited actively to create part of the work in their own minds, to experience something of the effects of this disorder, and doing so in dialogue with the staged action that is external to them. Furthermore, *My Brain is a Radio* also places great emphasis on sensual engagement throughout; hence the narrative is primarily mediated through the imagining of the senses. This sensory engagement occurs without the audience participating in any tactile interactions, yet still provokes awareness across the senses. The work utilizes a psychological approach in order to provoke physical sensations, since, despite producing a wide variety of physical symptoms, anxiety disorder is a psychological condition and thus should, I concluded, be represented through interactions that are psychological, rather than physical. The symptoms of anxiety disorder are as much about disengagement from one’s own body as they are about hyper-engagement with the body, and thus the audience experience of the work is primarily mediated through the mind. Had the work utilized a physical approach, that demanded bodily interaction from the audience, then it would have risked disrupting the imagining processes that are at the work’s core.

Machon argues that ‘the alienation from real intimacy in our workday lives, via such forums such as Facebook’, which I argue may contribute to or worsen the effects of anxiety disorder, ‘can be addressed by immersive practice, which demands bodily engagement’ (Machon, 2013, 26). A study by Anna

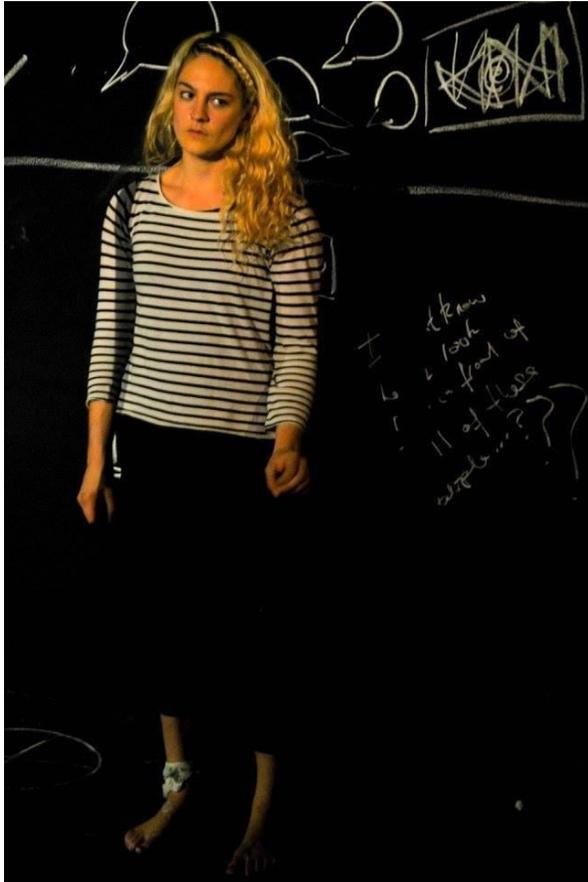
Vanucci, Kaitlin Flannery and Christine McCauley Ohannessian titled ‘Social media use and anxiety in emerging adults’ (2017) found that

higher daily social media use was associated with greater dispositional anxiety symptoms and an increased likelihood of having a probable anxiety disorder in a nationally representative sample of U.S. emerging adults. (Vanucci, Flannery & McCauley Ohannessian, 2017, 165)

In the same study, Facebook use, specifically, was associated with ‘activation of the physiological stress response’ (Vanucci, Flannery & McCauley Ohannessian, 2017, 165). Another study entitled ‘They Are Happier and Having Better Lives than I Am’’: The Impact of Using Facebook on Perceptions of Others’ Lives’ (2012), by Hui-Tzu Grace Chou and Nicholas Edge, suggested that Facebook use negatively impacts the way in which users perceive others. Chou and Edge found that users ‘tend to perceive that others are constantly happy, while paying little attention to the circumstances that affect others’ behaviour’ (Chou & Edge, 2012, 119). As I discuss in Chapter 2, in dialogue with neoliberal ethics of high achievement and perfection, obsessive preoccupation with the achievements of others – which social media inherently encourages – results in the setting of unrealistic goals for mental health and happiness. What is more, the immersive nature of the social media experience reinforces feelings of disconnection and isolation from one’s peers. In the words of Machon, ‘technologically driven forms of communication, so predominant in work and socialising today, mean that the opportunities for sentient human interaction have been greatly reduced’ (Machon, 2013, 25). Machon argues persuasively that the physical involvement required by an immersive performance presents individuals with opportunities that fulfill a ‘genuine wish to make human contact’ and to have directly lived or immediate experiences with others (Machon, 2013, 25). However, while the physical participation she describes might indeed have the ability to counter the alienation of everyday life, that effect is not necessarily guaranteed; and equally,

performance forms that do *not* require physical participation may still be able to produce experiences of immersion and intimacy. In this manner, I argue that *My Brain is a Radio* still achieves intimacy through means alternate to those including ‘bodily engagement’ (Machon 2013, 26). For example, the audience are made aware that the work is autobiographical and that just by witnessing it they have an insight into deeply personal experiences, which in itself could be viewed as an intimate act. This awareness is reinforced by all of the non-verbal dialogue and connection with the audience that I strived to implement and maintain throughout the performance. Unlike with physical engagement, which an audience member can either accept or refuse, however hesitantly, the interactions between audience and performer within *My Brain is a Radio* could occur at anywhere on the scale that exists between total acceptance and total refusal. For example, towards the end of a performance there was a point when I attempted to maintain eye contact with individual audience members, until one of us broke away (see Figure 2.). Many people immediately looked away; some would look for a period of time; and others were able to look for longer than I was able to sustain. Whilst performing the work it occurred to me how these interactions were, for me, affirmative of positive human and social interaction, which stands in opposition to the isolating effects of both anxiety disorder and the political status quo.

Figure 2 (5/11/14 looking at members of the audience during a performance of *My Brain is a Radio* at the Moor, Sheffield. Image taken by Jennifer Ibbotson)



Thus, in light of what I discovered by carrying out this project, I suggest that Machon's description of "true" immersive practice does not account for the importance of psychological participation within the physical experience. Her argument prioritises experiences of touch and the audience's *physical* involvement within a narrative. Machon implies that the mind is in some fundamental way separate from the rest of the body, referring to Rosalyn Driscoll's description of psychological participation as a 'bloodless, intellectual exercise' (Driscoll c.f. Machon, 2013, 79). I by no means discount the impact of physical involvement within a work, but do stress the importance of a work affecting us internally as well

as enclosing us externally. Gareth White supports this, stating that ‘if the performance does not just surround us but occurs within us then we are part of it, and ultimately it becomes part of us at the moment of performance’ (White, 2012, 228). Exploring a dialogue that mediates between the internal and the external represents a more holistic approach towards audience experience, although the internality of psychological participation renders it far more difficult to measure than physical participation. I contend that participation, in its various forms, has the potential to challenge the separation, from oneself and from others, which is symptomatic of the current political status quo. Bishop has previously argued that:

This desire to activate the audience in participatory art is at the same time a drive to emancipate it from a state of alienation induced by the dominant ideological order – be this consumer capitalism, totalitarian socialism, or military dictatorship. Beginning from this premise, participatory art aims to restore and realise a communal, collective space of shared social engagement. (Bishop, 2012, 275)

In this manner, *My Brain is a Radio* aspired to ‘emancipate’ audiences from the isolating effects of anxiety disorder and other mental health conditions that are symptomatic of the current dominant neoliberal politic (Bishop, 2012, 275). The collective experience that *My Brain is a Radio* sought to create does not offer an alternate mode of existing outside of the realm of anxiety disorder, but instead functioned by doing what Bishop terms ‘a nihilist redoubling of alienation’ (Bishop, 2012, 275). Thus, the social ‘alienation’ caused by my experiences of anxiety is *also* communicated through the work, reaffirming its existence within society. *My Brain is a Radio* does not present a utopian escape from the alienation caused by mental illness, but stages a reinstatement of that alienation which, simultaneously and conversely, works in counter to it. In other words, *My Brain is a Radio* attempts to *use* the alienating experience of anxiety disorder deconstructively, as a means of identifying, exposing and challenging a

state of being that society imposes on the condition's sufferers.

Within this discussion on immersive theatre and participation, and its potential to challenge or to undermine the current political status quo, it is useful to draw on Adam Alston's article 'Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, agency and responsibility in immersive theatre' (Alston, 2013). In this article, Alston contends that immersive theatre 'shares particular values with neoliberalism' by promoting 'self-made opportunity', commodifying experiences and by 'appealing to hedonistic and narcissistic desire' (Alston, 2013, 128 & 130). Although the audience experience of *My Brain is a Radio* does not promote 'self-made opportunity', it could still potentially be included within what Alston describes as 'hedonistic' and 'pleasurable' experiences (2013, 128 & 130). Alston claims that 'the pleasures of experience, even of experiences that may otherwise be defined as negative – anxiousness, fear, guilt, shame, embarrassment, etc. – may end up being felt as positive, stimulating or challenging attributes of encountering an event' (Alston, 2013, 130). The exploration of or confrontation with uncomfortable or frightening subject matter within an immersive performance can become a new experience to be consumed and "tried out", without providing space for reflection on the realities of the subject itself. Alston's analysis fairly reflects many productions that include an immersive element. Within the era of neoliberal capitalism, everything, including our deepest and most complex inner thoughts and feelings, can seemingly be replicated, packaged, mass-produced and sold, and immersive theatre may, problematically, provide the ideal medium for these purposes. However, immersive theatre is just that, a medium: its use or misuse is still significantly in the hands of the artist.

Alston's observations about the dangers of immersive theatre merging with capitalism's experience economy are surely valid. However, that economy is about replication and consumption; by contrast, a performance practice that is deeply and ethically engaged with its subject-matter is bound to explore that

material profoundly rather than simply offer replicable, consumable treatments of this. Performance pieces that are genuinely exploratory in this way cannot simply be ‘consumed’, since their meanings continue to unfold within those who experience them long after the work has come to an official end. In her article ‘Live Art, potential and changing the world’, writer and curator Mary Paterson examines the relationship between live art and the experience economy (Paterson, 2015). Although she does not address the subject of immersive practice directly, Paterson’s reflections on performance and capitalism still prove highly relevant to this discussion. She argues:

The experience economy is capitalism’s latest adventure in the conquest to commoditise and, like Live Art, it thrives on the generative potential of ideas and experience – or appears to. But of course, all of capitalism’s ideas are the same idea: money. And all of its performances are the production of capital. Artists, luckily, have a wider repertoire. (Paterson, 2015)

Paterson’s view is applicable to an artist of any practice or medium, including immersive practices. Her argument suggests that if a work is made in the interests of capital, then its inherent experiences also become a form of quantifiable currency in the economic system. Thus, as soon as a work is made solely in the interests of profit, it is no longer committed to its own subject matter, or its subject matter is even replaced with that of capital. Within this discussion, I do not underestimate the privilege of creating work that is completely disinterested in making profit, nor am I suggesting that artists should not be paid for their work. However, I *am* suggesting that work created solely for profit acts in support of the current neoliberal politic, by compromising what is a valuable means of reflecting on social issues and debates, both past and present. As in many other professions, the success or quality of art is often measured by how much revenue it receives, thus supporting the self-made notion that the “better” a work is, the more money it makes.

### *My Brain is a Radio* - Project Background & Process

*My Brain is a Radio* was conceived over the twelve months leading up to its premiere at 'Horror Souk' in November 2014. It was originally imagined as a performance lecture within which I would recreate elements from the numerous situations that caused me anxiety during the year following the death of one of my close friends. The title of the work - *My Brain is a Radio* - originates from when I last visited a doctor regarding a symptom of anxiety disorder. The doctor said to me: '...You just have to remember that your brain is a radio, and that you are in charge of how to change channels'. This one sentence significantly changed my own perceptions about anxiety, by reaffirming that this was a product both of my reality and of how I perceived the world around me, enabling a critical perspective on that condition of which I had previously been incapable. *My Brain is a Radio* was practically devised for Horror Souk, over a three-week period (6-24<sup>th</sup> October 2014) at the old shop building where it was later performed. During this time I participated in devising workshops and mentoring sessions with members of Theatre Delicatessen and external practitioner Terry O'Connor of Forced Entertainment, which supported the work's development. The designated space for the performance and development of *My Brain is a Radio* was in what would have once been the first stock room behind the shop floor. Overall, the emptiness of the deserted shop seemed symbolic of the vacuum that will remain, after we, and 'all that is living', have been subjected to an 'all encompassing violence...by a system that prioritizes things, abstractions' and 'money' (Jordan, 2006, 8). The remaining evidence of former employees, layers of dust, piles of outdated shop mannequins and the disintegrating interior decoration, together served to suggest a post-apocalyptic scenario of a potential future, where capitalism has self-imploded and climate change has taken hold (2006). As a performance site, its aesthetic suggested anxiety disorder as a product of an alienating and dysfunctional capitalist society, which has failed our emotional and physical human needs. These observations led me to realise the incompatibility of the shop space with my initial proposal, for which I

had envisaged developing the project as a performance lecture to allow for a somewhat humorous and detached mode of presentation. Following on from this, I began to reconsider both the political and experiential dimensions of the project, which would enable it to provide a more subjective experience of anxiety disorder.

My initial starting point for *My Brain is a Radio* was writing down memories of times when my life had been affected by acute anxiety, including: having a panic attack on the first day of my Masters degree at Brighton University; lying awake in bed imagining what my body will be like when I am dead; leaving a restaurant during a friend's birthday supper because of my sensitivity to bright lights and inability to swallow food or use cutlery; trying to talk to my mother and pretend that I am fine; having heart palpitations whilst watching a circus performance with tunnel vision at the Wales Millennium Centre; continuously 'finding' lumps on different parts of my body; and walking by the sea, feeling like the sky was squashing me and not being able to breathe properly. I wrote a list of all of the things that had scared me during this time, each beginning with the phrase 'I am scared of...'. The list affirmed to me that it was an overarching fear of mortality that had underpinned the specific mental processes of my anxiety; hence, each line either makes reference to or contrasts with the line preceding it, thus forming and re-enacting this fear. The act of reading it aloud transformed it into a form of free verse, its rhythm generated from the structure's inconsistent syllable arrangement. Moreover, in writing the list, I was able to disentangle a very complex and subjective set of experiences and to reflect upon occurrences of these individual fears:

I am scared of dying

I am scared of what it is like to die

I am scared of what my body will be like when I am dead

I am scared because I can't imagine what my body will be like when I am dead

I am scared of going for dinner

I am scared of eating food in restaurants

I am scared of the way that cutlery feels in my mouth

I am scared of pretending that I am enjoying myself

I am scared of choking

I am scared of the moment when I look people in the eye but then go dizzy

I am scared of being dizzy

I am scared of pretending to be normal

I am scared that everyone will find out that I am going mental

I am scared of my body

I am scared of unexplained lumps...

During the process of devising *My Brain is a Radio* I looked at how other artists who have dealt with issues around mental health and human psychology integrated aspects such as autobiographical experience, text, physicality and form in their work: these included *Kitchen Show* (1991) by Bobby Baker; *Box of Frogs* (2012) by Stumble Dance Circus; and *The Working Life* (2012) by Superflex. Additionally, I looked at work such as Tim Etchells' *City Changes* (2008), which although not explicitly about mental illness, influenced my eventual writing style through its use of description and attention to detail. Etchells' work is formed of twenty texts and begins with a depiction of a city where 'nothing ever changes'; the original account is rewritten nineteen times, in its author's phrase 'to produce a sequence of increasingly preposterous variations, mutations and exaggerations of this imaginary place' (Etchells, 2015). According to Etchells, *City Changes* 'playfully unpacks some of the political and emotional baggage carried by concepts such as change and chaos, stability and stasis' within social organization and

the urban environment (Etchells, 2015). The example of *City Changes* demonstrated how altering a single narrative, or descriptive detail, can impact upon the entire work, drawing the link between what occurs on a small and large scale, and correlating with Bobby Baker's statement that: 'how we treat each other in supermarkets, how we care for our children, are symbolic of something much larger, international relations - war and peace' (Brown, 1993). In accordance with Baker's statement, not only is the personal political, but also the banal and the everyday.

Baker's *Kitchen Show*, the first part of a collection of her *Daily Life Series*, proved influential during the devising process of *My Brain is a Radio* with regard to the relationship between the everyday or mundane, and wider social issues. *Kitchen Show*, delivered as a solo by Baker, explores a number of associations which might arise from performing kitchen-based, habitual chores such as peeling vegetables. She includes a set of instructions for expressing feelings such as "anger", amidst the confines of humdrum domestic tasks and expectations for keeping the house presentable. Baker states that the work 'makes you think about why you do things - out of habit, upbringing, indoctrination' (Brown, 1993). Additionally, Baker's *How to Live* (2007) series presents herself in the role of the therapist who delivers instructions and advice on everyday living in contemporary society. *How to Live* was made in response to Baker's experiences of psychiatric treatment during a time of being mentally unwell. 'How to Live: skill 7' is a tutorial on 'acting opposite to the emotion', something Baker refers to as 'a very useful skill for situations where you have excessive negative emotions, ones that you don't want or are out of proportion to the situation', such as anger, guilt or fear (Baker, 1993). Hence, the work indirectly communicates how western society deems the expression of certain emotions (particularly those that are extreme) 'inappropriate', chiefly within the public realm. The *Daily Life Series* and *How to Live* both make important connections between human emotions and the socially implicit rules that govern our society. By 'instructing' the viewer through performance, Baker's work encourages reconsideration of one's own

mental health, behaviours and social interactions. *My Brain is a Radio*, like *How to Live*, employed the role of the therapist as a means to explicitly discuss the symptoms of psychological illness, from both detached and personal perspectives. The therapist persona also provided a structured framework within which I could give detailed descriptions of imagined places along with the theoretical and clinical framing of issues and structures of disclosure and confession. My choice to use the voice of a hypnotherapist as the narrative vehicle was inspired by a discussion with a friend about the benefits of cognitive behavioural therapy for anxiety disorder. During the process of devising I discovered artist collective Superflex's film *The Working Life* (2012), which became perhaps the most significant influence on the creation of *My Brain is a Radio*. *The Working Life* investigates the economic crisis via the narration of a hypnotherapist, leading its audience on an exploration of economic, personal and social identity in the contemporary era (Superflex, 2012). Superflex presents the voice of the hypnotherapist as soft and soothing, as it details an unnerving micro-narrative of the worker's journey of gradual detachment from their labour, culminating in a decision to no longer work and instead embrace the 'freedom' of the outside world. However, in this context liberation from labour is not presented as a utopian ideal, but rather as an empty unknowing, as the film ends somewhat uncomfortably, as the 'worker' enters the outside world. Like *My Brain is a Radio*, *The Working Life* endeavors to study the link between 'personal calamities and social catastrophes' (IMA Brisbane, 2014). It does not provide any relief or resolution, but instead aims to 'expose hypocrisy and invoke reflexivity' from audiences (IMA Brisbane, 2014). The resolution is not to be found within the work's narrative, therefore, but rests in its encouragement to audiences to look for answers elsewhere. *The Working Life* engages and troubles the viewer or listener by communicating its somewhat sinister content in a strangely tranquilising manner. The contradiction between content and delivery lends the work an increasingly chilling and uncomfortable air. Emulating this, I developed the narrative text for *My Brain is a Radio*, creating hypothetical scenarios with multisensory descriptions: my voice became a coaxing guide, attempting to detail the different symptoms of anxiety disorder through a consideration of sound,

sight, touch and internal dialogue. The narrative takes the listener on a journey that travels down through their subconscious mind and into a dinner party with their friends, where they will “experience” some of the psychological and physical symptoms associated with anxiety disorder, symptoms that intensify as the work progresses. The voice instructs the listener to self-reflect within the virtual scene created by the narrative: ‘How do you think that you look? To all of these other people...’ With this in mind, *My Brain is a Radio* attempted to cultivate a “first hand” experience, where the audience are directed to imagine their own versions of situations and feelings. The voice of a hypnotherapist thus provided an ideal means to allow others to investigate (what originated as) my experiences, but from their own subjective point of view. I chose to use my own voice in the piece precisely because it is, explicitly, rooted in *my* experiences of anxiety disorder: by narrating the work, I am in effect talking to myself, assuming a position where I am both in charge of and victim to the voice.

Despite changes to form and structure that occurred through the work’s evolution, the use of aerial rope or corde lisse within *My Brain is a Radio* has remained centrally important. However, I was initially concerned that as a practice that has grown out of traditional circus, its aesthetic signaled ‘circus’ and nothing else. One of the primary tasks in the devising process was thus to experiment with a movement language on the rope that was more ‘human’ than ‘circus’. As discussed in Chapter 1, the aesthetic of the aerial performer, particularly within traditional circus, conceals certain qualities (for instance, of fallibility) and is thus portrayed as more superhuman than human: one example, in the way that the aerial performer can give the effortless ‘illusion of flight’, when in actuality they must work both with and against the laws of gravity to maintain their trajectory (Zaccarini, 2009, 92). Some circus productions such as those by Cirque Du Soleil, for example, have as noted earlier pushed the image of the aerialist beyond the image of the superhuman, to one that is ‘animal, reptilian and even alien’ (Tait, 2005, 126).

Conversely, I attempted to uncover and strip back the image of the aerial performer, so that I could draw attention to my actual relationship with the rope, which includes my relationship with gravity and my capacity for failure. My original intention was to use only aerial choreography, along with the vocal narration of the hypnotherapist, since the aesthetic of the vertical hanging rope lends itself well to the “taking you up/down” hypnotherapy metaphor: this refers to the hypnotherapy patient’s descent from the conscious mind, down into the sub- or unconscious mind, which traditionally occurs at the beginning of a hypnotherapy session. However, after some experimentation, I found it necessary to expand the choreography beyond the vertical and onto the horizontal plane. As I discuss in Chapters 1 and 5, the way that aerial work is read is necessarily affected by the context in which it is presented. In *My Brain is a Radio* the act of writing/drawing in chalk provided another physicalized perspective with which to view my experience of anxiety disorder, and also an alternative way of occupying the performance space. I used the chalk as a way of responding to the aerial choreography and thus creating a dialogue between the vertical and horizontal. However, whilst the aerial rope choreography had an ephemeral quality, the chalked marks on the walls were (semi-)permanent; over the duration of the run of shows at Horror Souk, the walls and floors gradually filled up with drawings and words. What is more, the chalked markings and the sticks of chalk themselves mimicked the aesthetic of the white rope, further reinforcing the link between the two mediums (see Figure 1.).

In order to physicalize the spectrum of emotions surrounding anxiety disorder, I initiated choreographic experiments to explore tension and release, legato through to staccato, and also setting up motifs to be repeated and then broken. On the rope this included movements that demonstrated fluidity, sinking, suspense, precarious balance, falling and constriction. In order to maintain a loose choreographic structure, I devised a “bank” of movements that could be interspersed through the work and that also functioned within the height restrictions of the space. During the initial devising period, I would film

myself “playing” on the rope in order to reflect upon what I was doing. I soon became aware of my own subconscious and conscious intentions to sustain “perfect” lines, pointed toes, body tension and gracefulness. These are qualities that are often prerequisites for professional jobs involving aerial performance, and the majority of aerialists, myself included, dedicate considerable training time in order to acquire them. Furthermore, all of these qualities, with the exception of gracefulness, often improve the strength of, and so are essential for, much aerial vocabulary. In aerial work the view is common that if you are not going to point your toes, you must instead flex them or at least ensure that you “commit” to an intended aesthetic choice. I argue that, by “committing” to a particular aesthetic, one disguises the natural awkwardness of the body and, by the same means the individuality or human vulnerabilities of the performer. In contrast, by refusing to “commit” to a pre-considered aesthetic, the body and all of the past experiences that have shaped its movements can be seen in its entirety without distraction. This is not to say that I found presenting the natural awkwardness of the body, as I have described, without challenge. My trained body found it difficult to relinquish its commitment to aesthetics, as did my mind, which had to let go of the ego associated with looking like a well-trained aerialist. In an endeavour to not-commit to an aesthetic choice on the rope - which became in itself an aesthetic choice - I attempted to abandon any movement that was not required for the execution of a specific movement. Whilst formulating the aerial choreography I strived to find a movement quality that occurred as a “natural”, human response to my interactions with the rope, one perhaps more pragmatic than concerned with aesthetics. In doing this, I tried to let my body exist as it wants, at times holding myself upright and at others allowing gravity to pull my body downwards (see images 1 and 2). By “natural”, I mean that the movement does not require any prior processing or training to be executed, although I acknowledge that in the context of describing aerial performance this proposition could prove problematic on at least two counts. Firstly, in order to perform aerial choreography and to attain desired levels of safety, one must first undergo a considerable amount of repetitious training, which potentially nullifies the notion that it could be spontaneous.

Secondly, if we assume the view that we as human beings are products of our experiences and learned behaviours, “natural” movement either does not exist or is indeterminable from our entire movement vocabulary. One could argue that in the case of creating “new” movement on equipment such as aerial rope, one at first has to be thoroughly familiar with established techniques, in order to be able to deviate from them. In this manner, I have attempted to use my already ingrained understanding of aerial choreography as a foundation, or base layer, for additional movement that is “natural”, improvised and responsive. Despite the potential problems of this word, I consider it still necessary to employ the term “natural” for the purpose of describing the choreographic process both in writing and in general practice. What the complication of terminology points to, in this instance, is that I am attempting to push the limitations of aerial rope choreography towards something that exists between both “live art” and “circus”. The Live Art Development Agency (LADA, 2018) describes live art as ‘a framing device for a catalogue of approaches to the possibilities of liveness by artists who chose to work across, in between, and at the edges of more traditional artistic forms’ (LADA, 2018). Hence, one of the primary functions of the aerial rope in *My Brain is a Radio* is to represent my own ‘liveness’ in being human (LADA, 2018). In order to facilitate such liveness during the performances, instead of being entirely reliant on a prepared repertoire, I presented a predesigned situation which provided me with space to improvise and to respond within the moment. Within this design, I was aware that the kinaesthetic elements employed, such as the aerial rope and chalk choreography, must provide a balance of “activity” and “inactivity” in order to allow the audience space to digest the work’s narrative. The fluctuation between “activity” and “inactivity” also reflected the changing emotional and physical states of being, ensuing from the experiences described by the hypnotherapist.

*My Brain is a Radio* was never performed or rehearsed as a complete piece, prior to having an audience. This was not due to a lack of time or organisation, but rather that it was impossible to do so, as the piece

simply did not function without the audience presence: indeed, the connection between performer and audience constituted one of the primary facets of the performance. There were some actions that only came to fruition when performing it, such as holding and then releasing my breath at specific points. This began in response to the “hypnotherapist’s instructions” to breathe deeply as part of the “relaxation” process, which occurred at the beginning of the piece, but developed subsequently because influenced by my connection with audiences. I had not always been aware of the hold/release of breath happening and it is only through watching video recordings of the work that I became conscious of doing it whilst performing. It predominantly occurred when I perform drops on the rope - holding my breath whilst preparing and then releasing the air when I have dropped - but also when I was engaged in ground-based action. This then evolved as a technique of tension and release, which formed part of the work’s overall kinaesthetic scoring. The employment of “drops”<sup>13</sup> whilst using the corde-lisse was intended as another form of “tension and release” choreography, but also inescapably manipulated audience responses. Due to the low height of the ceiling (five - six metres) at The Moor, I was only able to perform drops that were small, or that I was able to control the height of, such as the ‘slack drop’<sup>14</sup>, where I am able to preset where I land (see Figure 3). Whilst watching *My Brain is a Radio*, audience from a non-aerial background were less likely to predict how my movements on the rope would unfold. For example, when I climb to the top of my rope and let go, they may in that moment forget that I have a loop of rope around my waist and legs that will catch me before I hit the concrete floor. In another instance, I hang from a looped “noose” around my neck that is held together and completely supported by my left hand, despite looking somewhat dangerous (see Figure 4). Another aerialist will not necessarily recognise my choreography, but will still understand my relationship to the rope on a very basic level; this does not, however, imply that they will be desensitised to the anxiety attached to watching particular types of aerial work. Peta Tait illustrates the powerful ‘visceral sensations’ that even ‘experienced circus goers’ have had whilst viewing

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<sup>13</sup> see index of aerial choreography

<sup>14</sup> see index of aerial choreography

aerial performance, whereby they are reminded of both their own ‘physical survival’ and ‘the continuity of’ their ‘aliveness’ (Tait, 2005, 142). The feelings pertaining to ‘physical survival’ are amongst the predominant characteristics of anxiety disorder, with the exception that these are often generated by more commonplace or everyday situations and in this manner, drops are integral to the aerial choreography of the work (2005, 142).

Figure 3 (10/11/2014 about to release into slack drop<sup>15</sup> during a performance of *My Brain is a Radio* at the Moor, Sheffield. Image taken by Sara Hill).



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<sup>15</sup> See index of aerial choreography

Figure 4 (5/11/14 “noose” to drop on the rope during a performance of *My Brain is a Radio* at the Moor, Sheffield.

Image taken by Jennifer Ibbotson)



### Repetition, Kinaesthetic Scoring & Transverse Pathways

Throughout the development of *My Brain is a Radio*, I explored aerial rope in relation to site, text, voice, dramaturgy, choreography, and improvisation, and also experimented with different combinations and versions of these elements. Hence, the synergy of all these was responsible for, and together formed, the work's text and subtext. One of the key ways in which the different aspects of *My Brain is a Radio*

worked together was in terms of how they physically, sonically and conceptually mapped the space. This physical mapping demanded a negotiation between the vertical and horizontal axes, and thus this interaction alters the space in between. The physical mapping of the space also determines the sonic and conceptual mapping, as it changes the relations between objects, which thus affects aesthetics and sound. During this exploration, I considered the possibilities in the vertical/horizontal interrelationship and the aesthetic hierarchies and power dynamics within the performance environment, and how these might be reworked. My practice was also informed by the theoretical concept of a 'transverse way', an analysis of which was conducted by Ronald Bogue, who, in his book *Deleuze's Way: Essays in Transverse Ethics and Aesthetics*, reflects upon and develops considerably Gilles Deleuze's proposition of the 'transverse way' (Bogue, 2007, 5). According to Bogue, Deleuze's 'transverse way' influenced Felix Guattari's theories of 'transversality' and Deleuze and Guattari have also collaboratively written about 'transversals' in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) and in *Anti-Oedipus* (1984) (Bogue, 2007, 2). In *Deleuze's Way*, Bogue unpacks Deleuze's reference to the 'transverse way' and assesses how this might be feasibly applied in various creative contexts. According to Bogue, the 'transverse way' describes the route that exists in the diagonal space in between horizontal and vertical axes, and, by emphasizing the 'differences' between the two, potentially opens up 'new possibilities for life, in the arts, in the sciences, politics, philosophy and all other spheres of action' (Bogue, 2007, 3). 'Transversality' offers *all* forms of performance a means of considering both spatial and conceptual relations, but I suggest lends itself particularly well to aerial performance, which 'spectacularly' occupies vertical space, and moves towards and away from this (Bogue, 2007, 3). Clearly, what is vertical or horizontal can shift depending on one's perspective. In the context of aerial, I refer to ground-based activity as part of the horizontal axis and action that occurs on the rope as on the vertical axis. By the same means, what is considered as the 'transverse' can also be subject to change (Bogue, 2007, 3). For instance, the rope artist may be the transversal element between the rope and the floor, but equally, the rope may be the transversal,

connecting the rope artist and the ceiling. Bogue states that ‘transversals [...] are the passages that render maximum intensity to the differences between multiple locations’ (Bogue, 2007, 2). In the case of aerial rope, one is made aware of the difference between the bottom of the rope (usually, but not always, the floor) and the place at the top of the rope. Aerial rope provokes spatial consideration: two places are connected, not only materially but also by a live presence. By inventing new choreography on aerial rope, one is generating new ways with which to consider the relationship between the two planes. Examples of transverse relationships within *My Brain is a Radio* include those between: the rope and the floor; myself and the ceiling; anxiety disorder and the audience; anxiety disorder and the rope; anxiety disorder and the performance space; anxiety disorder and neoliberalism; and neoliberalism and the performance space. Bogue suggests that ‘the ‘transverse way’ takes another form in ‘Deleuzian nomadism’, by establishing relations across ‘cultural spheres’ and serving as a means with which to counter the ‘Western-dominant process of globalization’ (Bogue, 2007, 5). ‘Deleuzian Nomadism’ is defined by its existence ‘between two points’, linking different spheres and ‘forever mobilizing’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 380). In this manner, Deleuze and Felix Guattari detail how ‘Nomads’ are perpetually in the ‘intermezzo’, adding ‘desert to desert’ and ‘steppe to steppe’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, 382 & 380). The fluid concept of nomadism stands in opposition to the borders and ‘striated space’ of the ‘State’, and thus Bogue suggests that ‘the “nomadic”’ offers an ‘open whole’ formation which in turn could facilitate ‘a globalism’ that undermines western neoliberal politics (2004, 385). One could argue that by engaging in ‘transversality’ and creating links between different spheres, *My Brain is a Radio* acts in opposition to the separation caused by neoliberal, binary representations of mental illness, and thus anxiety disorder, as discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. ‘Transversality’ also potentially offers an alternative ‘third way’ of considering spatial occupations within performance practices beyond the vertical and horizontal planes, something that could be further unpacked and explored in future practical research projects.

The use of repetition in *My Brain is a Radio* was an element that developed through the performances, rather than during the devising period. It was originally initiated in response to feelings of frustration and being inescapably stuck in the thought patterns associated with anxiety disorder. The use of repetition also grew out of my immediate responses to the audience and other elements within the piece as a physical manifestation of the sense that the interactions between myself and the audience were caught in an ongoing mirror reflection, by sharing the experience the piece offered. Repetition took the form of “cyclical” movements on the rope that repeatedly returned to a hiplock<sup>16</sup> and also as chalked patterns on the walls and floor, such as circles, square, question marks, smiley faces and words. The sound of repeatedly chalking the same pattern also provided an additional sonic layer to the work as a whole. The composition of these actions could be likened to that of minimalist musical works, or process music, which are principally characterised by the repetition of musical phrases or motifs. Minimalist music presents an ‘immortal’ present tense that does not challenge a chronological or linear series of events, but rather expands within a singular moment or feeling. In the case of *My Brain is a Radio*, the use of repetition sought to convey a sense of being trapped within the confines of anxiety disorder and thus contributed to the work’s immersivity. This correlates with the experience of what Manuel Castells refers to as ‘timeless time’, which ‘diminishes as the space of work, family, shopping, and social interaction interweave into one flattened, expanded universal space’ (n.d, 3). By the same means, the fears associated with anxiety disorder come to exist in the same sphere as “normal” everyday occurrences; for example, one may go to the supermarket and suddenly become overwhelmed with a fear of dying, which is seemingly irrelevant to the task of shopping. The musical and action-based motifs utilized in both *My Brain is a Radio* and minimalist compositions could be equated to the ‘microcosms and macrocosm’ of capitalist social structures, as detailed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their essay ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’, included in their seminal *Dialectic of*

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<sup>16</sup> see index of aerial choreography

*Enlightenment*, first published in 1944 (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, 120). Adorno and Horkheimer claim that

Culture now impresses the same stamp on everything. Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part. Even the aesthetic activities of political opposites are one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, 120)

The ‘culture’ to which Adorno and Horkheimer refer results from the domination of capitalist industries, and has been structured in the best interests of generating capital (1997, 120). Ian McDonald proposes that minimalist music composition is reflective of ‘human passivity in the face of mass-production’ within a ‘pre-planned corporate lifestyle’ (McDonald c.f. Kalia, 2018). He maintains that the restrictions set by the repetitious structure of the music deny the self of both passion and human emotions (2018, 59).

However, in the case of the live performing body, I would argue that emotionality and individuality are potentially exacerbated by the restrictions of repeated movement. Movement-based repetition performed by the human body is more likely to evidence discrepancies between the repeated phrases than those performed on musical instruments. The human body is a site that encompasses numerous variables, thus making it impossible to achieve exact duplication when repeating movements. In the case of *My Brain is a Radio*, the repetitions do not strive to attain perfection, but instead serve as a demonstration of the imprisoning effects of anxiety disorder. A defining aspect of anxiety disorder is the sufferer’s continuous battle to behave “normally” within what are considered to be socially expected behaviours. The struggle to complete or perfect repetitions becomes representative of the anxiety sufferer becoming trapped in both thinking cycles and normative behaviours. What is more, the imperfections of the repetition, revealed through duration, illustrate the vulnerability and humanity of the performer; this in turn renders the

somewhat intangible condition of anxiety disorder more immediate and accessible.

Within the process of creating and researching *My Brain is a Radio*, I have referred to the movement or physical action that occurs within performance as kinaesthetic scoring. Kinaesthetic scoring can manifest as repetition and is also a means of physicalizing some of the transverse connections with the work. The kinaesthetic scoring in *My Brain is a Radio* left both a trace and no trace, part documented in chalk and part existing only in the present. Just as a musician would notate a score for a piece of music, this work kinaesthetically scored responses, in the present moment, to a previous experience of anxiety disorder. Hence, kinaesthetic scoring also acts as a means of ‘instant composition’, whereby I respond in the moment to any aspect of the performance situation and the growing tension within the narration (Lycouris, 2000). Examples of this that occurred when performing *My Brain is a Radio* included marking pathways, drawing thoughts, writing thoughts, writing experiences, drawing experiences, writing messages to the audience, tracing my body, tracing my own shadow, breathing, mouthing, looking at the audience, drawing notation and drawing with the chalk for sonic effect. The constantly shifting physical notation within *My Brain is a Radio* meant that no two performances were the same. This process of scoring within the work served to expose the multi-faceted nature of its subject-matter, visibly manifesting ideas, experiences and memories. Anne Hutchinson Guest observes that ‘the process of dance notation requires reducing four-dimensional movement (time being the fourth dimension) to a two dimensional surface’ (Hutchinson Guest, 1990, 203). My own process of notating the experience of anxiety disorder via kinaesthetic scoring required that I unpack its numerous dimensions and represent them in a performance environment. The dimensions of that environment function as a ‘map’, as described by Deleuze and Guattari, providing ‘multiple entryways’ to the core subject of the work (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 12). This project has adopted elements of Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of maps, in accordance with transversity, drawing on their claim that the map ‘is entirely oriented toward an

experimentation in contact with the real' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 12). In order to conduct an investigation into what is real, they advocate that one must 'make a map, not a tracing' since 'the orchid does not reproduce the tracing of the wasp; it forms a map with the wasp' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 12). The primary difference between the 'map' and the 'tracing' is that the 'map' aims to 'construct', whereas the 'tracing' serves to 'reproduce' and thus detaches itself from lived experience (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 12). Although much of the material within *My Brain is a Radio* was conceived from personal experience, the dimensions within the work functioned together in order to 'construct' new experiences for audiences, rather than solely 'reproduce' my own or that of others. Collectively, the elements within the piece formed a 'map' that was 'open and connectable', with multiple points of access to the subject matter (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 12). Thus, the primary dimensions of the project such as the physical action (in three dimensions), time, audience, sound and narrative all formed entry points into the work as a whole.

Throughout this project I endeavoured not only to create a dominant metaphor of suspense and holding onto one's sanity, but to also to discover and formulate a map that counters the psychology associated with anxiety disorder. The project has provided both a problem and a solution: paralysis caused by fear of what could happen, but conversely demonstrations of capability, and of responding and existing in the present moment. By engaging with ideas of immersivity and immersive practice, as requested in the brief set by Theatre Delicatessen at the start, this practice-based research project encouraged a thorough consideration of what it means to 'participate' in a performance. Aerial work, as something that requires training and a level of expertise, is not a discipline that can be easily integrated into a physically participatory performance. Despite this, I suggest that *My Brain is a Radio* still allowed a form of participation from audiences in terms of its required cerebral investment, reinforcing the notion that

participation is not always a physical endeavour and also offering audiences an insight into the experience of anxiety disorder. In his seminal text *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière critiques assumptions about passive spectatorship, asserting that ‘spectators see, feel and understand something in as much as they compose their own poem, as, in their way, do actors or playwrights, directors, dancers or performers’ (Rancière, 2009, 13). It is such composition, undertaken by the spectator, that *My Brain is a Radio* aims to encourage, whereby spectators participate in the performance by ‘refashioning’ it in their ‘own way’ (Rancière, 2009, 13). My use of the hypnotherapy script, which underpinned *My Brain is a Radio*, aimed - without subterfuge - to stimulate the audience’s participation and potentially allow the merging of their experiences with my own. As I remark in Chapter 2, in combining aerial rope choreography with my own autobiographical experiences of mental illness I present my accomplished physical capabilities in contrast to the fear and lack of self-confidence that manifests as part of anxiety disorder. This juxtaposition evidences the complex nature of mental illness and how the notion of illness cannot be neatly detached from wellness, and, by the same means, how ability, physical or otherwise, cannot be easily disconnected from inability/disability. The deployment of aerial performance within *My Brain is a Radio* suggests a strength and determination that one can possess in spite of anxiety disorder. Given that the audience knows the work is partly autobiographical, it demonstrated my humanity, in the form of both my physical achievements and the psychological challenges I continue to face. In *My Brain is a Radio*, I was not an anonymous performer within a large-scale spectacle, but the artist and performer of a solo piece of work in intimate relationship to the audience and the space: through this, the work attempted to show that anyone is capable of developing anxiety disorder. The project also evidenced aerial rope’s potential in communicating ideas surrounding risk, cyclical thoughts, fear and (in)competence, in addition to presenting as a metaphor for ‘going under’ in the context of hypnotherapy. In the performance, aerial rope was able to function in service to other elements, without becoming a solely spectacular focal point, as is common with circus disciplines. *My Brain is a Radio* demonstrates

that rope choreography can be approached in terms of embracing pedestrian and task-based movement. However, it also presents the inherent conflicts that arise from exploring improvisation within a discipline that requires extensive training. As I have discussed earlier in the thesis, the context within which aerial work is presented profoundly affects the reading, meaning and function of aerial choreography as it features within a performance. Concepts such as the ‘transverse way’ as proposed by Deleuze, and Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the ‘map’, offer alternative ways of utilizing and perceiving aerial work spatially, physically, conceptually and in relation to other elements (Bogue, 2007, 3: Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 12). However, these concepts are particularly pertinent in relation to *My Brain is a Radio* due to the centrality of the vertical and the horizontal planes within the work, physically and relating to metaphorical embodiments of the themes surrounding anxiety disorder. Kinaesthetic scoring has also offered an alternative perspective with regard to all of the different elements within *My Brain is a Radio*, including the aerial rope choreography. Hence, the framework of kinaesthetic scoring, perceives the different elements of the work as separate but cohesive, working together to create a greater meaning.

#### *My Brain is Radio - Film*

In 2015, I recreated *My Brain as a Radio* as a thirteen-minute film, which was filmed by videographer Naomi Smyth, edited and performed by myself, and which received outside eye support whilst filming from Nicole A’Court Stuart. Since then it has been screened at the London Barbican Centre, Arnolfini (Bristol) and TaPRA 2016 (University of Bristol) in both the contexts of academic research and as a creative project. In an attempt to recreate the aesthetic and mood of the old shop building originally used for the live work, *My Brain as a Radio* (film) was filmed at a disused, empty warehouse, with white walls and grey floors, in the suburbs of Bristol. The bleakness and emptiness of the warehouse, as with the earlier live version, is a reference to the isolating effects of neoliberalism. Given the openness of the new

space I had no way of recreating the ‘giant blackboard’ effect that was present in the live work, and instead used video editing to cut between shots of my writing on a brick wall in another part of the warehouse, with the action on the floor and the rope. The cuts between the two spaces became a literal visualization of the internal and external narratives already present in the work; the internal being the hypnotherapy narration and the process of writing on the wall, and the external being the action filmed on the rope and floor in the centre of the warehouse. Being able to use different camera angles and distances for *My Brain as a Radio* (film) meant that I had far more control over what I wanted the viewer to give focus to. The film used five different shots: wide, medium and close-up in the warehouse space, and a medium and close-up of the brick wall. The shots filmed in the warehouse space were static and the wide camera shot was angled so that the rope appeared in the centre of the shot, and provided a point of reference for the depth and breadth of the space. I use the cuts between different shots as a way of creating rhythm and building tension throughout the film. Hence, the cuts become faster towards the end of the film, signalling a crescendo in my anxious thoughts and feelings. In the final film, I do not include a wide shot until the very end of the ‘going under’ stage in the hypnotherapy script. The film begins with a close up of my face and follows my body up and down the rope with close-up and medium shots, without referencing the wider space. The choice to retain wider shots until later in the dramaturgical narrative was to try to build an intimate and insular relationship with the viewer during the introductory moments of the work, drawing focus to me, rather than the space around. Throughout *My Brain as a Radio* (film), I return to close-up shots of my face in order to maintain the spectators’ connection to myself as a performer and as a reminder that that the work is autobiographical. These close-up shots also effectively substitute for the act of looking directly at members of the audience during the live work.

In the process of remaking *My Brain as a Radio* for film I retained the original hypnotherapy monologue as the narrative foundation for the film. However, I had to consider how I would recreate or reimagine,

the visual narrative of the work, in addition to the feelings of immersivity and anxiety encouraged by the hypnotherapy script, and intimate relationship between myself and the audience. When watching a film or video, the screen or projected video image becomes the mediator, whereas during a live work, there is no mediator. Becky Peterson has argued that ‘film’s relation to the body is traditionally distanced: the audience sits far from the screen in order to view it’ (Peterson, 2010, 228). However, while in the contemporary era of smartphones the gap between spectator and screen is (literally) shrinking, the screen still does detach the spectator from the action on screen, thus widening the gap between spectator and performer, and spectator and film content. In *My Brain as a Radio* (film) I wanted to use the mediation of the projected video image to reinforce feelings of detachment, in the context of both anxiety disorder and mental illness, and as reflective of the isolating effects of neoliberalism. Additionally, unlike in the live work, during the film my body and the space around was shown as subject to processes of fragmentation, and thus even greater detachment. In his book *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image*, Douglas Rosenberg observes that

human bodies performing in real time and space are constrained by both somatic and temporal absolutes [...]. Mediated images of bodies in motion are subject to a different sort of logic, one that is without the corporeal terror that is wrought by tearing, effacing, reordering and stitching together fragments of movement or body parts that do not logically flow in such an arrangement. (Rosenberg, 2012, 53)

In *My Brain as a Radio* (film) there are many instances where the camera shot is focused solely on a fragment or section of my body, such as my feet, legs, head or hands: for example, on the image of my feet climbing the rope in isolation. The disruption of the logical ‘flow’, as described by Rosenberg, or arrangement of my body, reflects the fractured relationship between mind and body during anxiety attacks

(Rosenberg, 2012, 53). The decision to focus on individual parts of the body and fragment the relationship between certain filmic shots was a choreographic decision made during the editing process, not during filming. The aerial rope work for the film was choreographed more precisely than within the live performance but tried to retain some of the pedestrian and awkward qualities present in the original. The rope work was still devised around the notion of ‘cycles’ and cyclical movement, but this time incorporated the idea of loops that ‘dissolved’ or went nowhere. From the live performance, I kept both the propeller<sup>17</sup> rotations at the beginning (during the going ‘under’ stage) and the large ‘slack drop’<sup>18</sup> towards the end. As the warehouse space was much higher (9 metres) than Theatre Delicatessen’s shop building (5 metres), I could execute bigger drops on the rope and use more vertical space than previously. For example, the ‘slack drop’ was bigger, and therefore more dramatic than in the live show. In contrast to the live show, in the film the focus was more on the choreography or action on the rope than on the words being written. However, in the new medium more emphasis was placed on the *process* of writing, rather than on what was actually being written or drawn. What was carried over effectively in the transition from live performance to film was the notion of kinaesthetic scoring. Hence, all of the action presented on screen is readable as a ‘kind of digital text’ (Rosenberg, 2012, 3). The fragments on screen aim to work together and in deliberate contradiction, in order to create a visual and sonic rhythm which reflects the isolation of anxiety in the neoliberal age.

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<sup>17</sup> See index of aerial choreography

<sup>18</sup> See index of aerial choreography

# Chapter 5

## *No Performance III, No Performance IV & Contra:*

### **Social, Political, Historical, Religious and Personal Occupations of the Female Body**

This chapter details the genesis of *Contra*, a solo performance work and practice-as-research project which investigates social, political, historical and personal occupations of the female body. The project evolved via three distinct stages and contexts: first, as one third of a (ground-based) performance triptych entitled *No Performance III*; second, as the first stage of a solo performance work merging aerial rope and text, entitled *No Performance IV*; and third, as the second (and still ongoing) stage of a solo performance work, with more nuanced consideration given to the relationship between concept, text and aerial rope, currently entitled *Contra*. At all stages, the development of this work was influenced by both academic research practice-led and professional contexts, and its different variants have been presented at symposia, conferences, theatres and art galleries, including: TaPRA Symposium at the University of Sheffield (2016); Buzzcut Festival (Glasgow, 2016); ‘Volt’ at Circomedia (Bristol, 2016); ‘The Works’ at Brighton Dome (2016); ‘Hangwire’ at Jacksons Lane Theatre (2017); ‘Postcards Festival’ at Jacksons Lane Theatre (2017); ‘Deconstructing the Spectacle’ (screening of live performance footage) at Arnolfini (Bristol, 2017); and ‘CircusNext’ at Provinciaal Domein Dommelhof (Belgium, 2018). The project also received mentorship and direction from professional performer-directors Terry O’Connor (Forced Entertainment) and Ursula Martinez (La Soiree, Duckie). Key themes addressed through the different stages of the project include: the social, historical, political and personal occupation and control of women’s bodies; objectification; the ‘male gaze’; the ‘female gaze’; autobiographical performance; verticality, aerial rope; aerial rope and text; objectification; Cartesian Dualism (the mind body split); sexual identity; and Christian narratives regarding gender within contemporary society (Mulvey, 1989, 19; Dirse, 2013, 15).

Most recently, in the latest version of *Contra* notions of female queerness, and more specifically my own queerness, have emerged and become important to the arguments that the work presents.

### *No Performance III*

*No Performance III* is a performative triptych devised in response to the word ‘No’ and its multiple, potential meanings. It was instigated and directed by Terry O’Connor, and written and performed by myself and fellow scholar-practitioners Bridie Moore and Moe Shoji. While my contribution to the triptych did not include aerial work, I reflect here on its process of creation and performance since it was subsequently developed into two later performances that did include aerial choreography. *No*

*Performance III* was inspired by ‘Say the Word’, a five-year AHRC-funded creative research project led by O’Connor at the University of Roehampton between 2009-2014. ‘Say the Word’ aimed to explore ‘collaborative frames and language’ and adopted a creative process whereby ‘words sent by other artists’ would be used to ‘trigger new pieces of work and writing’ (O’Connor, Houston & Kelleher, 2012, 103).

Among the words O’Connor received in the course of the project was the word ‘Non’ (English translation: ‘No’), sent by artist Sophie Calle. Thus, a new phase of ‘Say the Word’ ensued, investigating the potential meanings or insinuations of the word ‘No’. In her book ‘The Yes of the No’, writer-artist and scholar Emma Cocker investigates the word ‘No’ and its fluctuation in meaning.

*No* - look up the word in the dictionary and be told of its negative connotations, how it functions as an interjection that refuses, denies, or seeks to cancel out. *No* is an utterance that stands in the way of things or that declines to participate. It is a form of obstacle or dampening down like the stubborn voice of the party pooper or killjoy for whom the glass remains half empty, never half full [...]. It is the response dreaded by the unrequited lover, the puncture wound by which a proposal gets let down or loses its verve [...]. Taken as an instruction or a rule, it is the governing

voice of restrictive authority that tells us what not to do, which attempts to silence or stop us still in our tracks. (Cocker, 2016, 6)

O'Connor's project continued as part of her Professorship at the University of Sheffield, and in 2015 she asked myself, Moore and Shoji, to contribute our original short texts in response to the word 'No', in the context or mode of our choice. My own initial response to 'No' was an instinct towards self-defense, or of rebellion and fighting back; a 'No' to anything controlling or entering my (female) body; a 'No' to social expectation. 'No', to me, was empowering and confrontational, and intrinsically connected to notions of consent. At that time, my response to this word was considerably influenced by past and continuing personal experiences and interactions, such as: being sexually harassed repeatedly on my way home; being told that it was 'unprofessional' - as a female physical performer - for me to have not shaved my underarms; being groped on public transport; having my body and its physicality commented on by strangers; having my consent violated during sexual encounters; and being subjected to an endless stream of corporate advertising in many forms including billboards, internet videos, magazines, newspapers and radio shows that in some way aim to help me 'fix', 'improve' or edit the way I look, sound, smell or feel. I also began to draw multifarious connections between the 'No' and the different social and cultural forces that were trying to restrict, control, permeate or enter my body - beauty products, other people, advertising, words, ideas, clothing, shoes, or household items. The desire for radical change and for resistance to what I perceived, and continue to perceive, as ideological mechanisms seeking to control women's bodies and identities, could be articulated and asserted in one, two-letter word: No. Cocker likewise draws attention to the word's embedded connotation of rebellion:

Whilst the *yes* of surrender can signal the passive and acquiescent acceptance of the seemingly inevitable, *no* is a defiant gesture of protest that refuses to give up, give in. It is the rally cry of

dissent, the declaration that enough is enough, that a line has been crossed. Things have gone too far. The binary logic of opposites thus collapses in on itself. Here is the *yes* of the no, through which *no* allows, opens up or enables things to move forward, to move on. *No* stalls taking time (back) to re-think or re-imagine the trajectory of future action. (Cocker, 2016, 6)

For Cocker, ‘No’ is able to encourage new perspectives and re-considerations of the status quo, in addition to being a form of resistance. It was this starting point from which I began to formulate a text about the different parts of my body and how they experience the world, through my interactions as a white, western, queer, middle class woman. This text was incorporated into *No Performance III* and later, reworked, in *No Performance IV* and *Contra*.

The text I wrote for *No Performance III* discusses different parts of my body, including and juxtaposing information which is functional, scientific, personal and experiential. It also challenges notions of mind-body dualism, as set out by René Descartes in his seminal text ‘Treatise of Man’ (1629), which continue to underpin contemporary ideas regarding objectification. My text reinforces (rather than separates) the connection between mind and body, by giving thinking and experiential power to individual body parts and thus unifying all elements of mind and body as one entity. The text adopts the phrase ‘I have two...’, as a repetitive frame with which to present the different parts of my body: the repetition works both to build yet also to cover conceptual and textual layers, as both reductive and productive; it also functions as an ‘anchor’ within the text that can be returned to each time. Although the word ‘No’ is only used once, the language seeks to work subtextually to communicate, on multiple levels, my saying ‘No’ to the objectification of my female body. In this manner, and with regard to Cocker’s description of ‘No’ as ‘a defiant gesture of protest that refuses to give up or give in’, the repeated ‘I have two...’ also

acts as an insubordinate reinforcement of the subtext (Cocker). ‘I have two...’ became both a passage into and a way of addressing some of the issues already highlighted, through the lens of my - and my body’s - experiences. Detailing the encounters and actions of individual body parts became a way to connect personal encounters with larger political, social, scientific and historical narratives. For example, in one section, I begin by explaining the size and some of the functions of my feet (see script excerpt below) and then go on to detail an occasion when I used one of my feet to kick a man’s bike in retaliation to him catcalling me. In this way, the experiences of my various body parts are shown to have an outward ripple effect, as I link practical information about my body, to the actuality of my body in action and, finally, to the social and political implications of that action. Talking about the different parts of my body ‘objectively’ gave me the space to offer critical and factual reflection within the text. It also allowed me to objectify my body, whilst simultaneously resisting objectification:

I have two hands

Apparently they are big for a woman

I use my hands to do lots of things such as cooking, climbing, writing and swearing

I have two elbows

They exist almost halfway between my shoulders and my wrists

Having elbows means that I can bend my arms

Which I have got two of

They are attached to my shoulders which are quite muscly

Sometimes people remark that it’s unusual to see such a well-built woman

I have two knees

They exist almost halfway between my ankles and my hips

Knees are very useful

They provide a point of reference for skirt length

They also allow my legs to bend

I have two breasts

I bet you were hoping I would say that

I don't know what cup size they are but I am guessing an A

Or maybe a B

Sometimes I wear a bra to support my breasts to stop them sagging and losing elasticity as I get  
older

I have two feet

They are a size seven

They are bigger than the average female foot

I mostly use them for walking, climbing, running and dancing

Although the other day I used one of them to kick the front wheel of a man's bike when he said  
'sexy girl'

In creating the 'I have two...' text, I received guidance from O'Connor, through a series of one-to-one meetings, in addition to some informal workshop discussions together with Moore and Shoji. O'Connor also directed the performance, encouraging me to play with the pace at which it was spoken and with simple movements that drew attention to different parts of the body. We experimented with and then settled on an accelerated mode of delivery, so that it seemed as if the words were exploding out of me.

This way of performing the text gave the sense that it was an involuntary, forceful expulsion of the inner contents of my body. It also reinforced the notion of my body as a vessel to house, and also that is shaped by and subject to, its external experiences. Speaking the text at this rate became an aggressive or confrontational act, whereby the words became a kind of rapid gunfire that punctuated the air.<sup>19</sup> Each section of the text beginning ‘I have two...’ was prefaced by me slapping my leg (or a table) twice, as a way of introducing each verbal explosion and further accentuating the rhythmic quality of the performance:

*Slap slap*

I have two...

During this period, Moore and Shoji were also writing their own text-based material in response to the word ‘No’: Moore on the subject of ageing, and Shoji in relation to liminality and the permeable nature of borders. These three texts became the basis for *No Performance III*, a piece that wove our three female voices, and their responses to the word ‘no’, together. *No Performance III* was presented twice, first at the *TaPRA* Symposium (University of Sheffield, February 2016), and later at *Buzzcut Festival*<sup>20</sup> (Glasgow, 2016). At *TaPRA*, the three performers sat next to each other behind a table. The second performance at *Buzzcut Festival*, was a more developed version of the work which included choreographic elements, worked out transitions between sections, and more self-conscious performance personae (see Figure 5 for a description of *No Performance III* in the *Buzzcut Festival* programme; see Figure 6 for an image of the live performance).

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<sup>19</sup> Link to my performance at *Buzzcut Festival* (Laura Rosemary Murphy, 2016)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_T5tLcYymCA&t=89s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_T5tLcYymCA&t=89s)

<sup>20</sup> Link to the programme for *Buzzcut Festival* (Issuu, 2016)  
[https://issuu.com/buzzcutfestival2016/docs/buzzcut\\_brochure\\_5th\\_draft](https://issuu.com/buzzcutfestival2016/docs/buzzcut_brochure_5th_draft)

Figure 5. (Buzzcut Festival Program 2016)



Image: Courtesy of the artist

## No Performance III

**LAURA ROSEMARY MURPHY, TERRY O'CONNOR, MOE SHOJI & BRIDIE MOORE / No Performance III**

'No Performance III' is a performative triptych devised in response to the word No. The creation of this work has become an unfinished and unfinishable game, iterating the word No in relation to ageing, the colonisation of the female body, and permeable borders of subject and marginalia. It is both performance and lecture, considering the use of language within collaborative practice, and the grey murky areas of conversational interpretation and consequence.

Are we ready?  
...No

Terry, Moe, Laura and Bridie are four artists who share an interest in writing, moving and interrogating socially awkward subject matter. Collectively, their performance practices span live art, theatre, film and circus. They make performance work that mixes the flamboyant and the discrete in everyday acts of defiance and dissent.

Friday / 14:15 - 15:15  
Mary Barbour

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Figure 6 (Performance of *No Performance III* at Buzzcut Festival. Left to right: Moe Shoji, Laura Murphy, Bridie Moore. Image by Julia Bauer)



For both performances of *No Performance III*, the work was structured in four distinct sections: first, Shoji's introduction to the word 'No' and its multiple and possible meanings; second, Moore's reflections on the ageing female body; third, my own responses to the social occupation of the female body; and fourth, a closing speech from Shoji on the permeability of language. The relationships between the three of us on stage were depicted as playful, and the performance included moments of naughtiness whereby we interrupted each other and appeared in each other's 'scenes'. For example, during Moore's section on ageing, I would perform a noisy 'warm-up' routine in the background, in an attempt to distract and to get the audience's attention. In the same 'scene', Shoji and I appeared on stage with torches and shone light on her face, in order to illustrate Moore's points about how her skin looks under different lighting conditions. During my own 'scene', I broke the fast-gunfire-style delivery of my text to ask Moore and Shoji questions, and to 'fact check' statements I was making, whilst they were sat at the side of the stage. These interactions and overlaps between scenes were methods which sought to marry, and to celebrate,

our three, different performance personalities, ages and subjects, under the umbrella of our collective engagement with the ‘No’.

#### *No Performance IV*

*No Performance IV* was performed at ‘Volt’ at Circomedia (Bristol, UK) and ‘The Works’ at Brighton Dome (Brighton, UK) in September 2016<sup>21</sup>. It was framed as a work-in-progress piece, though had received some direction and mentorship from O’Connor, after its first two performances. *No Performance IV* grew out of *No Performance III* in a period over which I became increasingly interested in and concerned with the relationship between my aerial practice and the issues underpinning the text, regarding objectification and the social ownership of female bodies. The more that I spoke the text I had written for *No Performance III*, the more I reflected on its relevance for my own and my female colleagues’ experiences as professional aerialists. Aerial performance is a genre that positions (usually acrobatic) human bodies in vertical space in order to be looked at. The aerial performance genre, and the industry endorsing it, has evolved in such a way so that aerial work is predominantly judged from an aesthetic standpoint, rather than with regard to its sonic impact or conceptual content. As I have argued in Chapter 1 of this thesis, the nature of aerial work is, historically, to objectify the performer, regardless of their gender, and that this is related to traditional circus legacies of spectacle and dazzlement. Additionally, the UK industry in its entirety shows a preponderance of female aerialists and disproportionately small number of male aerialists. That gender imbalance has influenced the evolution of aerial performance as a genre to the point where it is predominantly a ‘showcase’ for silent, female bodies, positioned to be looked at by the spectators below. This ‘showcasing’ of silent female bodies is a product of what feminist Laura Mulvey describes in her seminal essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (first published in 1975), as ‘patriarchal culture’ (Mulvey, 1989, 15). While the gendered structures and politics of society

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<sup>21</sup> Link to a video of *No Performance IV (scratch showing)* live performance (Laura Rosemary Murphy, 2016) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIoflXz2UDQ&list=UUUVw24F9HxXSg0vrCu7byGmA&index=11>

and culture have arguably evolved since the first publication of ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, Mulvey’s analysis of female objectification remains relevant in the present day. Mulvey’s argument details how film is able to code ‘the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order’ (Mulvey, 1989, 16). Aerial work operates similarly, by utilizing ‘the erotic’ to distract from the power structures surrounding the performing subject (1989). This way of looking at aerial bodies in motion - and specifically, female aerial bodies - has been normalized, both within the aerial performance genre and in wider societal perception. Also relevant to this discussion and for my wider research on this topic was the manner in which women were presented within, and also occupied, vertical space. Aerial, and specifically rope work, engages directly with vertical space: the rope acts as a connecting vertical line, on which the performer is positioned. A different, yet related, example of the female body being positioned within vertical space can be found in billboard advertising, as discussed in Chapter 3. One of the primary feminist criticisms of such advertising is the manner in which this typically reinforces socially defined gender roles, by depicting passive, silent female characters who thus become ‘bound by symbolic order’ and attached to their position as ‘bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning’ (Mulvey, 1989, 834). My recognition of the correspondence between aerial work and billboard advertising - in terms of the occupation of vertical space, use of spectacle and objectifying processes evident in each – suggested a way to bridge the original ‘I have two...’ script and the aerial element introduced into *No Performance IV*. I aimed to combine aerial work and spoken language to produce a deconstructive aerial spectacle, in particular by encouraging the audience towards a process of looking that objectified my own body and simultaneously prompting them to reflect on their own objectifying gaze (Kershaw, 2003, 595).

*No Performance IV* runs at approximately twenty minutes and is split into three distinct episodes or sections. In the first, I enter the stage wearing a gold, one-shouldered dress and carrying a plastic bag containing three apples. The dress I am wearing is a little too tight, intended to show the uneven lumps

and curves of my body underneath. It is intended as a reference to gaudy and outdated women's 'party-wear', which accentuates the female figure and draws the attention of other people. I put the bag down next to the microphone stand situated on stage left and proceed to eat an apple loudly into the microphone. When I have finished eating the apple, I wipe my hand on my dress and retrieve a folded piece of paper from my bra and read a version of the story of the Garden of Eden, famously recounted in the Book of Genesis:

Now, the serpent was more deceitful than any other animal that Jehovah had made and it said to the woman, "Has God really said that you shall not eat from any tree of the garden?"

The woman answered, "We may eat all of the fruit from all of the tree in the garden, except for the fruit from the tree which is in the middle of the garden. God has said you shall not eat from it nor shall you touch it for if you do you will die".

Then the serpent said to the woman, "You shall not surely die but God knows that as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will know what it good and what is evil."

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, beautiful to look at and that it would make her wise, she took some of its fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate it too. Then the eyes of both of them were opened so that they knew they were naked and they sewed fig leaves together and made girdles for themselves. When they heard the footsteps of Jehovah as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, the man and his wife hid from him among the trees of the garden.

And Jehovah called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”

And he answered, “I heard the sound of thy footsteps in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked so I hid myself.”

Jehovah said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the fruit from which I forbade you to eat?”

The man answered, “The woman who thou did give to me, she gave me fruit from the tree and I ate.”

Jehovah said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

The woman replied, “The serpent deceived me and I ate.”

Then Jehovah said to the serpent, “Because you have done this you shall be hated more than all beasts. You shall crawl on your belly and eat dust all your life and men and serpents shall always be enemies. They shall bruise your head and you shall wound them on the heel.”

To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly increase your trouble and your pain. You shall be subject to your husband and he shall rule over you.’

But to the man he said, “Because you have listened to your wife and you have eaten from the tree from which I forbade you to eat, as long as you live you shall earn a living only by hard work. By

hard work shall you raise food to eat and you shall die and your body go back to the ground, because from dust you were made and to dust you will return.”

And Jehovah made garments from skins for the man and his wife and clothed them. And he sent them out of the Garden of Eden to till the ground. (Kent & Sherman 2004)

At the moment that I finish reading the text, the song ‘Lonesome Hunter’ by Timber Timbre begins to play. I slowly put down the text and pick up the empty plastic bag that is lying on the floor. I walk to the side of the microphone, look into the empty plastic bag and slowly put it over my head (see Figure 7). I smooth the plastic bag over my face and make a hole for my mouth with my other hand. I raise my hands, appearing to enjoy the moment of moving to the music, before reaching up to make holes in the bag for my eyes, so that I am able to see out from underneath the bag. I walk ‘seductively’ over to the rope rigged in the centre of the stage. I then proceed to hang off of the rope before beginning to climb, using a looped variation of a twisting Russian climb<sup>22</sup>. The aerial rope routine lasts for the duration of the song and finishes with me hanging in a side-planche<sup>23</sup> position inside a loop held with my left hand (see Figure 8). When the music ends, I stand to face the audience, with the rope still looped around my stomach. I remove the rope and walk, with a sense of purpose, back to the microphone stand. I tear the plastic bag off of my face, but leave the remainder of the bag around my neck. I then drink large gulps from a bottle of water, allowing myself to take loud breaths each time after I swallow. I continue to breathe into the microphone for a few seconds, before delivering the ‘I have two...’ text. At the end of the performance I walk off the stage.

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<sup>22</sup> Please see index of aerial choreography

<sup>23</sup> Please see index of aerial choreography

Figure 7 (Video still from live performance of *No Performance IV* at the Brighton Dome, 2016. Videographer Emma Bailey)



Figure 8 (Video still from live performance of *No Performance IV* at the Brighton Dome, 2016. Videographer Emma Bailey)



The story of the Garden of Eden used to open *No Performance IV* tells how humans were first separated from God and expelled from Paradise. It also provides a narrative account for the ‘beginning’ of

patriarchy and of women's subordination by men. For *No Performance IV* and for the research project as it continued, retelling the story of the Garden of Eden introduced and examined ideas of female blame, subordination and temptation, and, additionally, the institutionalisation of heterosexuality. Thus, *No Performance IV* broadened outwards to consider multiple cultural narratives, including those from Christianity, that have sought and still continue to regulate women and their bodies. In *No Performance IV*, my main aim was to unpick the role and representation of women implicitly endorsed by the story of the Garden of Eden, and then to undermine this in the subsequent sections of the work. Thus the final section of *No Performance IV* was intended as a means of breaking the spectacle and moments of beauty that the aerial choreography creates, whilst also challenging the construct of female identity offered by the biblical story: in particular, that of the woman who succumbs to temptation and thus 'deserves' the punishment of subjection by her husband. The placing of the bag over my face is intended as a visual metaphor that crystallises this transition from subject to object. By putting the plastic bag over my face and then performing on the rope in front of the audience, I am objectifying myself, but in the process, I thus become both passive object and active agent. It is in this context that I embody some of the 'paradoxical qualities' of Kershaw's 'spectacles of deconstruction' (Kershaw, 2003, 596). What is more, the performance shows me succumb to the temptation of becoming a 'sexual object', which further complicates notions of agency within the objectification process. The song 'Lonesome Hunter', used during the aerial section of the work, was intended as a means of adding a performative layer, which implicated the audience as the objectifiers (Timber Timbre, 2011). The lyrics that form the song's chorus suggested to me at the time of making *No Performance IV* that all people, and in the case of the performance spectators, have the capacity to objectify or to be 'hunters':

Please break this spell you have me under

Every heart is a lonesome hunter

Please break this spell you have me under

Oh yes, every heart is a lonesome hunter (Timber Timbre, 2011)

Furthermore, the lyrics ‘who am I to deny this moment? And who am I to even question it?’ reinforced to me at the time the idea that the process of ‘hunting’ or objectifying is naturalized (Timber Timbre, 2011). (Upon reviewing *No Performance IV* at a later date, I came to the conclusion that the connections I had previously made between the lyrics and ideas of objectification were somewhat tenuous and were unlikely to be decipherable by the audience). The aerial choreography within the work was used as a means with which to intensify the objectification process, by mixing ‘awkward’ movements or poses with lyrical gestures made by my arms and hands. I experimented with hanging from different parts of my body that I considered less conventional, such as my elbows and ankle, and also attempted to challenge more conventional choreographic pathways, by at times reaching behind my back to hold the rope (rather than via the front of my body); that said, it could be argued that in the context of circus performance, there are no truly ‘unconventional’ pathways or parts of the body to use for certain tasks. I intended the aerial choreography to present my body simultaneously as both grotesque and beautiful, provoking spectators’ discomfort in watching me perform, but still retaining their attention. I wanted to demonstrate an awkwardness on the rope that would supersede the expectations of elegance and virtuosity generally associated with aerial work. Yet I was aware of the paradox at the centre of this intention: since I was already demonstrating my virtuosity and competence just by being on the rope, it was then difficult to also present an aesthetic of awkwardness, clumsiness, or the grotesque. Without providing enough context or exposing the impetus for the aerial choreography, this element of the performance risked becoming, as Ursula Martinez commented in rehearsal, ‘just another rope act’ (2017). Hence, if my intention was to create an aerial spectacle that explicitly encourages audiences to look at my body, and to do so ‘critically’, then this had to be adequately framed by other elements of the performance.

I was also aware that in *No Performance IV* the individual sections or episodes, including the song used in the middle aerial section, did not correlate clearly to support the production of meaning and foster critical spectatorship. My relationship to the rope needed further justification and the absence of this was evident both in the transition to the aerial section and in the rope choreography itself. I was guilty, perhaps, of ‘shoe-horning’ aerial work into a theatre piece, a kind of borrowing seen increasingly in contemporary practice and which I have always criticised. Thus, making *No Performance IV* reaffirmed the importance of having a clear purpose for the aerial choreography, in the relationship between performer and apparatus, and in the function of the apparatus itself. A more thorough consideration of these elements would have clarified the narrative and message of *No Performance IV*. However, some aspects of the performance were effective in demonstrating how spectacle and objectification can be challenged. In particular, the image of the plastic bag over my face, without the sensationalising effect of the music or the rope work, provided an effective anticlimax to the previous scene. My task-based, pedestrian actions, such as walking to the rope, drinking water, or taking the plastic bag off of my face, further served to undermine the spectacle of the scene before (see Figure 9). Deliberately, there was no finesse to my actions and I allowed myself to look and sound disgruntled and out of breath, leaving the remains of the plastic bag round my neck and not adjusting my dress, which had ridden up to my waist. The text, which exploded out of me, further subverted or discredited my attempts to objectify myself previously.

Figure 9 (Video still from live performance of *No Performance IV* at the Brighton Dome, 2016. Videographer Emma Bailey)



### *Contra*

The transition from *No Performance IV* to *Contra* happened during a mentoring session with O'Connor, where we agreed I should rename the project with a more effective stand-alone title (given that the previous titles referred to earlier performance contexts). The title *Contra* was decided on and has been used for the work's life from that point to the present. 'Contra', meaning to be against, or contrary to something other, seemed a fitting replacement for 'No', which no longer seemed to encompass the larger themes within the work. Although versions of the work had previously been shown at professional performance events, the context in which they had been developed was that of an academic institution. That changed when *Contra* was programmed as part of 'Hangwire' (June 2018) at Jacksons Lane theatre (London, UK), a one-week artist development residency and final performance event. In addition, I undertook one week of research and development at The Hanger, an aerial rehearsal space in south-east

London. As part of this phase in the development process, I applied for and was granted funding from Arts Council England, which enabled me to pay my own artist fee, for the additional rehearsal space, and a director's fee. With O'Connor unavailable at this time, I instead began working with performer and director Ursula Martinez. I originally approached Martinez to work with me on *Contra* given her experience in presenting and contextualising the female body in a performative context. Her work with comedy, text and female nudity, in addition to her perspective as a queer performer, also became valuable contributions to the development of the project. Martinez's solo work, detailed in Chapter 3, *My Stories Your Emails* (2010) intertwines her own personal stories with emails sent from strangers and bridges the gap between her different performance personas. The work reflects upon Martinez's popular cabaret act *Hanky Panky* (2000), which is both a striptease and 'disappearing-hanky' magic act, the video of which was released onto the internet against Martinez's wishes. Martinez details the various ways her body was both viewed and became both a subject for discussion, following the internet release of *Hanky Panky*.

During the two-week research and development periods at the Hanger and Jacksons Lane, Martinez and I workshopped and reworked some of the original sections from *No Performance IV*. A slightly longer performance emerged from this process that had four overlapping sections. A key aim of this phase was to create links and minor narratives that would allow the different sections of the work to coalesce: for example, the appearance of the serpent in Sections 1 and 4, and the use of the apple to ease the transition from Section 1 to 2. Martinez suggested on the first day of research and development, that I perform *Contra* naked: I agreed with her reasoning that it 'made total sense' to present a performance work about the female body naked, so that the audience would be required to look at my body whilst I spoke about it (and spoke about them looking at it); it also gave any additions to my body - such as the clingfilm, introduced later - more focus and clarity. Another important change made was to the opening section of the material, where I had originally told the story of the Garden of Eden. This became a scene whereby I

puppeteered the end of the rope, so that it became the serpent. My character, although still ‘myself’, thus referenced a naked Eve walking on stage, who then became the three voices of Eve, the Serpent and the narrator of the story. The effect of me puppeteering the rope as the Serpent provided a context for the rope and my relationship to it, in addition to making the work more comedic. The idea that *Contra* could be funny or comedic was an unexpected revelation within the creation process and made many of the themes within the work more accessible for audiences. The employment of comedy within *Contra*, has also influentially shifted the way in which the work is currently developing, to the point where it has been rebranded as a ‘feminist-circus-comedy’. Other examples of comedy or comic timing employed in *Contra* are with the ‘I have two...’ text, which formed the second episode. This text was slowed down from its earlier rapid speed so that I spoke at a more natural pace, allowing time for the audience to listen to the detail of what I was saying. Giving the words more space and time meant that some of the absurdities within the text were made more apparent, which added to the comedic value of work and gave space for me to experiment with comic timing. This space also gave me more opportunity to experiment with facial expressions and to add physical gestures to reference the different parts of my body. Some of the sections added to the text during this creation period, which had some of the greatest comedic value, emerged from me playing or improvising when I had not learnt my lines fully:

Sometimes ovulation makes me want to have sex with people I wouldn’t usually want to have sex

with

Like really manly men

Or men with beards

Or men in vests

Or... just men really

In addition to adding comic value, such parts of the text provided opportunities for me to reference or discuss my identity as a queer performer. In the context of the discussion surrounding women's bodies and the manner in which these are occupied or appropriated by society, disclosing my queerness became another means of dismantling heteronormative ways of perceiving and objectifying me and my body.

Mulvey describes this heteronormative, male-dominant way of perceiving gender:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. (Mulvey, 1989, 837)

By referencing my queerness in *Contra*, I undermine or challenge binary notions of gender and sexuality, and also thus the notion that I am, or could be, a 'passive/female'. Hence, the concept of the 'passive/female' is presented as a potential narrative or perception of female identity, rather than as something that is an intrinsic 'female' quality. Overall, what *Contra* strives to do is to combine and interweave multiple potential narratives surrounding (my own) female identity, particularly those that are personal, political, social, historical and religious. In doing this, it aims to present and to criticize some of the aforementioned issues mentioned in this chapter, and also to offer a version of the female subject, of whom is both a product of and a counter to these multiple narratives.

In Section 3 of *Contra*, I wrap myself up in clingfilm, accompanied by the song 'You're My Meat' (1981) by Joe Jackson, and whilst intermittently speaking a text that discusses the practicalities of meat packaging (see Figure 10). This section was inspired both by my covering my face with a plastic bag in *No Performance IV* and by Carol J. Adams' seminal text *The Sexual Politics of Meat* which explores the relationship between the consumption of meat and gendered violence towards women (Adams, 1990). For

Adams, 'meat is a symbol of patriarchy' and 'manhood is constructed in our culture, in part, by access to meat eating and control of other bodies' (Adams, 1990, 16 & xxvi - xxvii). She goes on to argue that processes of 'objectification, fragmentation and consumption' inherent in patriarchy are used to control both women and animals (Adams, 1990, 27). She also examines the ways in which corporate advertising uses similar strategies for meat products and women in terms of objectification and sexualization. Adams describes on her website how 'butchering' is linked to 'both the representation and reality of sexual violence in Western cultures', which 'normalizes sexual consumption' (Adams, 2018). She continues:

This structure creates entitlement to abuse; with the structure of the absent referent the states of objectification and fragmentation disappear and the consumed object is experienced without a past, without a history, without a biography, without individuality. (Adams, 2018)

Adams' analogy was particularly useful in terms of adding to and complicating the multiple narratives or identities of the woman I embody in *Contra*. 'Packaging' myself in cling film, in conjunction with the song and the meat packaging text, highlights and sensationalizes my consumability as a female subject. The direct manner in which the text sets out the practicalities of meat packaging further underlines the effect of bodily objectification:

The meat packaging market is a large and complex market composed of many sectors within the market. One of the primary concerns for any company packaging meat is the ability to deliver a fresh product to customers. This is often achieved in a variety of ways depending on the type of meat that is being packaged.

One of the most important factors in meat packaging is the type of meat being packaged. Many sectors within the meat packaging industry use certain types of packaging to best preserve the type of meat being packaged. (US Packaging and Wrapping, 2017)

The wrapping of my body in cling film provided a *leitmotif* that could be repeated throughout the duration of the music. The clingfilm distorts and fragments my body - like a piece of meat - cutting into sections where I have a higher percentage of body fat. It isolates certain parts of my body from one another. For example, wrapping cling film round my waist and between my legs draws attention to my vagina.

Wrapped in clingfilm, I am simultaneously both sexual object and grotesque other. By the same means, I am both passive object and active subject who chooses to wrap herself in clingfilm. Importantly, the cling film wrapping provides greater context for the spectacle of the aerial rope choreography in the final section of the work that follows. The rope choreography within *Contra* is premised on my succumbing to temptation and becoming intertwined with the serpent, whilst being presented as packaged object. The aerial choreography is performed in 'slow motion', as a reference to scenes from television shows and films that utilize slow motion in order to exemplify the aesthetic 'assets' of women (see Figure 11). My actions on the rope are designed to make it look as though I am weightless or floating, and choreographically endlessly reaching for the serpent. I am, as described by Mulvey, 'bound by a symbolic order' so that 'man can live out his phantasies and obsessions [...] by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning' (Mulvey, 1989, 834).

However, in the context of Kershaw's 'Spectacles of Deconstruction', I am also embodying a paradox, a moment where different and opposing narratives of women are able to exist together (Kershaw, 2003, 595).

Figure 10. (Photo taken by Milan Szytura at CircusNext selection week, Theater op de Markt, Belgium, 2018)



Figure 11. (Video still taken from footage by Will Poole. Live performance of *Contra* at Jacksons Lane Theatre, London, 2017)



*Contra* continued (2018-)

After the 2017 residency and research and development period, *Contra* was performed again at Jacksons Lane's 'Postcards Festival' (July, 2017). In 2018, I was selected as a laureate by European circus platform CircusNext and Jeunes Talents Cirque Europe, and given support to develop *Contra* in 2018-20. With this support, *Contra* is currently being redeveloped and will be performed as a one-hour show in Spring 2019. What CircusNext has offered both myself and the project, in addition to funding, is access to a network of

European programmers, artists, venues and collaborators. Having *Contra* viewed by transnational audiences - for many of whom English is a second language or is not spoken - has forced various considerations with regard to the different ways that the work communicates its meanings. In relation to this, I am increasingly having to consider how a show which is heavily reliant on the word could be accessible to those who do not speak English. Some possible routes towards this include collaborating with a videographer so that the text could be projected behind me in another language, or having the script printed as part of the programme, so audiences are able to 'read along' with the performance. However, neither solution seems ideal in that each threatens to interrupt or distract from the performance narrative, or potentially to undermine *Contra*'s comic timing. However, I have also received feedback from some audiences who, despite not speaking English, claim to still be able to access *Contra*'s meanings and narrative through its use of imagery, physical theatre and my performance style. This feedback has encouraged an even deeper consideration into the relationships between image, movement and text. The issues underpinning *Contra* are in broad terms universal and are immediately relevant in many European cultures. However, some issues are more relevant than others, depending on the location. For example, in July 2018 I performed a work-in-progress version of *Contra* during residencies with Room 100 (Split) and Cirkorama (Pula) in Croatia, where LGBTQ issues formed a central part of the post-show discussions. Feedback from audiences has, so far, played an important role in determining the ongoing narrative and focus of *Contra*. At present I am constructing and researching *Contra* utilizing an episodic format. The primary challenge with this performance structure is ensuring that the work maintains a coherent overarching narrative, so that it does not become too fragmented. However, constructing *Contra* episodically provides an effective structure within which different narratives of female identity (as already discussed) are able to co-exist and interweave. It also provides opportunity to revisit and reinterrogate particular sections, ideas or 'characters'. For example, the serpent may reappear later in the work, to instigate or mediate other acts of temptation (See Figure 12). I am currently developing the 'I have two...'

script with a view to this becoming the work's central thread and providing the overarching narrative; as well as talking about various parts of my body, I am using the phrase 'I have two...' to discuss other less tangible facets such as personal tastes, musical preferences, food, family and so on. This manner of devising work and script writing enables me to merge different strands of my life and to interrogate ideas or opinions, whilst maintaining consistency and continuity by returning each time to the repeated phrase. I am also developing the aerial rope content in *Contra* in tandem with this changing script. For example, I am currently researching a scene whereby I talk about my own varying experiences of sexual harassment, interspersed with a climbing sequence on the rope. The intention of the scene is to juxtapose my autobiographical monologue with the experience for the audience of scrutinizing my naked (female) body performing aerial rope. The spoken text thus serves to undercut the visual image of me climbing up and down. Overall, the intention of *Contra* in the one-hour version is to continue unpacking the narratives that are critically embedded in the twenty-minute performance, such as objectification, the impact of religious narratives on contemporary culture, female sexuality, queerness, and the social, historical, political, and personal occupations of the female body. *Contra* is not only intended as a critique of the current status quo, but also as a means of opening up progressive discussion and debates regarding the role of gender, and how it impacts society as a whole. Through making *Contra* I am seeking, perhaps somewhat idealistically, to contribute to both a social reconsideration of gender (and associated gender expectations) and also to a new movement within contemporary circus, which fosters issue-based work and social engagement.

Figure 12. (Photo taken by Milan Szypura at CircusNext selection week, Theater op de Markt, Belgium, 2018 )



## Conclusion: *1000 Claps*

Throughout this research project into aerial work as critical practice, I have employed strategies that strive to connect the spectator to ‘immediacy and reality’, and that negotiate the relationship between the ‘real and unreal’ (LADA, 2018; Lievens, 2017). I have argued that, historically, circus performance in general and performance of aerial choreography in particular have turned repeatedly to myths of freedom, dominance, success and progress, as their primary material. A key aspect of re-imagining aerial work as critical practice has been acknowledging, utilizing, deconstructing or rejecting myths and narratives attached to the aerial body - such as freedom - which result from its position and employment within the circus genre. Circus has, throughout its history, attracted and somehow sustained two mutually contradictory interpretations: firstly, that circus appeals to the popular, upholding and embodying traditional, widely-shared values; and secondly, that it offers a home and safe space for marginalised individuals and misfits who exist on the fringes of society. In this way, it has adopted a paradoxical identity, employing spectacular performance as a means of re-enacting social propaganda and aligning itself with dominant power structures and hierarchies, whilst still self-identifying as a somewhat politically subversive performance genre. In her ‘Second Open Letter to the Circus’, Lievens critiques the double-edged status adopted by the circus genre and argues that:

Circus becomes a delightfully misleading hall of mirrors. As a true master of illusion, it makes clever use of the space between real physical condition (emerging from discipline) and what is staged (freedom), and this area of difference is exactly where the circus shines, shows off and flourishes. It thrives precisely in the distance between the real and unreal, between what is actually going on in the ring and what these actions do with our imagination. It is, actually, one

great delightful paradox. And this is also precisely the reason why the circus itself has always been the shrewdest promoter of its self-invented myths. (Lievens, 2017)

Challenging the paradoxes that circus promotes has been fundamental to my research into aerial work as critical practice: specifically, finding strategies to engage the form with current issues and debates, rather than with escapist fantasies as promoted by the spectacle of traditional circus.

Debord's theoretical analysis of spectacle has offered a useful model for comprehending the aerial performance spectacle, its engagement with (un)reality and its relevance to contemporary capitalist society and social propaganda. As cited in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Debord emphasises that spectacle 'is the very heart of this real society's unreality' (Debord, 1983, 8). Debord's critique offers a means of considering the political implications of the aerial spectacle and how it creates, as discussed in Chapter 1, 'spectacular representations of living human beings' (Debord, 1983, 29; Kershaw, 2003, 595). Kershaw's proposal for 'spectacles of deconstruction' has offered an effective framework for employing the spectacle of aerial work critically, by displacing, undermining, rearranging and providing commentary on the various cultural signs that constitute spectacular representation (Kershaw, 2003, 595). In this way, deconstructive spectacles have provided a model for undermining, interrupting or drawing attention to the power structures enacted by the aerial spectacle. I have applied this model in analyses of other practitioners' work and have also used it as a starting point for my own practical investigations. My research has evidenced that aerial spectacle can be used as an effective strategy for deconstructing or challenging mainstream ideologies, exploiting the potential in the three-way relationship between aerial rope, text and concept. Importantly, it has unlocked new ways of considering aerial choreography and what it can contribute to a performance work. In Chapter 5, I show with reference to the practice-based research project *Contra* how the use of text in conjunction with the spectacle of my naked female body -

performing aerial rope choreography in ‘slow-motion’ - was able to draw attention to the representation and spectacularization of female bodies; further, by positioning my body on the vertical plane in this way, I was able to draw parallels with, and critique, visual representations of women in billboard and other forms of vertical advertising. Through this particular (deconstructive) aerial spectacle, I attempted to subvert the patriarchal gaze and to encourage audiences to reflect upon the objectification process. In Chapter 3, I analyse how artists Ursula Martinez, Claire Marshall, Poppy Jackson and Irena Purschke employ different types of deconstructive spectacle, as a means of critiquing the process of female objectification which has emerged from a culture of visual consumption. As I show, all four artists consciously adopt a self-objectifying position that allows for the demonstration of complex female identities, exhibiting conflicting traits such as vulnerability, indifference, power, and agency in their performance personae. These artists actively challenge their own ‘labour-value’ through performance, in terms of both physical virtuosity and constructions of feminine identity; in particular, they address how the ‘unreal’, effortless spectacle of beauty or of physical virtuosity becomes disconnected from the reality of the labour invested to create the spectacle. I argued that Martinez, Marshall, Purschke and Jackson all expose the efforts of their labour as a means of deconstructing performative spectacle and by doing so connect audiences with the reality of human exertion, failure and fallibility. Chapters 4 and 2 of this thesis are also concerned with issues concerning human fallibility or failure, in the context of how autobiographical explorations of mental illness in performance can work to counter neoliberal aspirations for perfection, wholeness and beauty, in addition to reducing stigma and raising social awareness. Through undertaking my practical research project *My Brain is a Radio* and analysing Mish Weaver’s *Box of Frogs*, I evidenced how a seemingly paradoxical juxtaposition of text and aerial spectacle is able to expose the complexities of mental illness and the self-perception of those who experience this. As I put forward in Chapter 2, the removal of the performer from the horizontal, as with aerial rope, has the capacity to highlight human flaws and characteristics. The aerial spectacles in both *My Brain is a Radio*

and *Box of Frogs* are undermined by the fallibility of the performer and hence, as I argue, the audiences are deliberately inhibited from taking full uninterrupted pleasure in the spectacle or virtuosity demonstrated by the aerial choreography.

To conclude this thesis and draw together its central arguments, I discuss one final practical research project. *1000 Claps* (2017) explicitly engages with the questions and themes at the core of this research: the three-way relationship between aerial rope choreography, concept and text; the amalgamation of my practices as a live artist and aerialist; verticality; critical and/or socially engaged performance; neoliberal representations of lived experience; the subversion of showmanship and virtuosity; spectacle and the deconstructive or interrupted spectacle; the critical employment of illusion; and the body as a communicative device. *1000 Claps* is a fifteen-minute performance film that parallels ‘showmanship’ in British politics with the ‘showmanship’ in aerial work. I performed and edited the show, which was filmed by videographer Naomi Smyth and which also received outside eye support from Terry O’Connor (Forced Entertainment). *1000 Claps* was funded by WRoCAH as part of a knowledge exchange project and screened at Arnolfini Bristol for an event entitled ‘Deconstructing the Spectacle: Laura Murphy’s Performance Films’ (December 2017). This project was a final intervention into the aforementioned relationship between ‘immediacy and reality’ and ‘real and unreal’, addressing the mythology and virtuosity associated with both circus artists and politicians (LADA, 2018; Lievens, 2017). It constituted a practice-based enquiry into: verbatim text; spectacle; aerial choreography; verticality; rhythm; film; sound art/soundscape; repetition; and the relationship between text and aerial rope. *1000 Claps* effectively builds on Kershaw’s deconstructive spectacle model by integrating two spectacular narratives: that of the politician and that of the aerial acrobat. The film presents myself as a politician character and cuts between two alternate narratives filmed in the same theatre: one, where I am performing aerial rope; the other, where I am giving a ‘speech’, by lip syncing excerpts from original political speeches to an empty

auditorium. Paralleling the endeavors of these two figures creates an atmosphere in which the showmanship of political rhetoric is as apparent as the spectacle and tricks of the circus artist. *1000 Claps* was heavily influenced by DV8's verbatim dance-theatre show *Can We Talk About This* (2011), which, via the voices of multiple interviewees, 'deals with freedom of speech, censorship and Islam' (DV8, 2018). I was inspired to draw on their work after a discussion at CARD 2: Circus on the Edge (2015) conference at DOCH School of Dance and Circus in Stockholm, when another attendee put forward the question: 'Where is the circus version of DV8?' DV8 have always based their practice in physical theatre, yet simultaneously have looked to physical and other performance languages as a means of dealing very directly with social and political issues. I wanted to utilize methodologies for combining movement and text that were foregrounded in *Can We Talk About This* (with particular attention to two different scenes that use interview material with both Martin Amis and Ann Cryer) within a project that involved aerial work, since, as I have argued throughout this thesis, the combination of movement and text provides multiple opportunities in terms of reinforcing textual or conceptual meaning, and/or creating tensions through juxtaposition. In making *1000 Claps*, DV8's work suggested to me an innovative method for integrating original dialogue, and for dealing with ideas surrounding British values, nationalism, imperialism and freedom.

The central threads that run through *1000 Claps* are the consistent clapping rhythm, the aerial choreography, and a visually performed soundscape formed from a selection of speeches by Theresa May, David Cameron, Nigel Farage, Amber Rudd, Tony Blair and Margaret Thatcher which have been cut up and re-edited together. In *Can We Talk About This*, verbatim material is included in the form of 'entire' speeches or interviews, delivered by performers in a manner that makes these appear natural and conversational. This enables the audience to identify more closely with the content of the textual material and the perspective of the individual who originally delivered it, creating an array of multiple perspectives

on the issues presented in the work. In contrast to the individual personae that are represented in *Can We Talk About This*, the multiple voices and identities of the different politicians in *1000 Claps* are merged together to form one unifying speech. Although still recognizable and individually distinct, the voices are also homogenized in the way that they are all channeled through myself as sole performer, and also in the way that I have re-grouped together ‘themes’ such as national identity and terrorism via the editing process (see Figure 13). The verbatim material is closely cut up, edited and re-imagined to draw attention, firstly, to the nationalistic ideals fostered and appropriated by political figures; and secondly, to the manner in which such figures are individually utilized as vessels for communicating a broader political message. By editing the text in this manner, I intended to highlight the repetitive nature of political rhetoric and, importantly, to draw focus to the insidious nature of the language used to create social divisions and to inspire racial discrimination and bigotry. As observed by Debord, ‘separation is itself an integral part of the unity of this world’ (Debord, 1983, 8). Debord’s phrase signals that individuals in society are, paradoxically, connected by their common experience of separation and alienation; thus, societal ‘unification’ does not overcome but rather reinforces hierarchies, with its individual members joined yet still forcibly divided. Reflecting this two-way movement, *1000 Claps*’ fragmented texts, made cohesive through editing and performance, became a metaphor for the ideologies which unite people in their shared desires but also force them apart through processes of social ordering.

Figure 13 (Video still from performance of *1000 Claps*, 2017. Videographer Naomi Smyth)



*1000 Claps* begins with me entering an empty theatre to the sound of applause, dressed in a white shirt, gold tie, red sequined hot pants and flesh-coloured dance tights, the costume literalising my assumed identity as half political character, half circus performer; the ‘half dressed’ attire of my political figure character was also intended as a means of undermining conventional ideas of corporate costuming (Figure 14). The film cuts between shots of me as the circus artist dusting my hands and preparing to climb the rope, along with moments of me as the political figure greeting my ‘imaginary’ audience who are cheering from the empty seats in the theatre. As the applause fades away, a single, repeated clap continues, providing a steady rhythmic metronome, and I, as circus performer, begin to climb the rope. Throughout *1000 Claps*, the single clap evolves and multiplies to produce ever more complicated rhythms

which are mirrored visually through spliced, integrated shots of hands closing together in various forms of applause. The clapping rhythms continue for the duration of the film and dictate its pace and rhythm, underscoring and interrupting both the aerial and political speech narratives. In this way, the clapping links the dual narratives of circus and political speech, two forms of performance which, as discussed in Chapter 1 in the context of circus, traditionally expect applause in exchange for displays of daring, ‘showmanship’ and dexterity. The clapping soundtrack was also used as the starting-point and basis for the aerial rope choreography, which attempts to respond to its rhythmic shifts throughout the film. The film can be roughly divided into six sections, including the opening and finale. The other four sections feature the performance of the edited speeches, which are loosely divided by the following themes: the British dream; national identity; terrorism; liberty and freedom. The aerial rope choreography in *1000 Claps* operates in between these sections as a means of linking the speeches and embodying their thematic content. In Chapter 1, I discuss the historical relationship between circus and colonialism, and refer to Peta Tait’s argument that in the nineteenth century ‘aerial performance confirmed a belief that European culture was headed towards an unstoppable domination of the natural world and non-European societies’ (Tait, 2005, 13). In particular, Tait’s analysis refers to the occupation and exploration of ‘air space’ enacted by aerial performance, seeing this as a metaphor for colonial expansion and romantic notions of freedom (2005, 13). The dual narratives of political figure and circus performer, as presented within *1000 Claps*, set up a mirror reflection of the notions of freedom that manifest in two separate forms. The aerial work strives to reference narratives of freedom and spatial occupation from both traditional circus *and* the textual content of the speeches featured in the film. Freedom, in particular, is set up as a recurring theme and defining quality of British values throughout the speeches, such as that spoken by Tony Blair: ‘Freedom of speech. Freedom of association. Freedom from arbitrary imprisonment’. The lone figure of the aerialist performing to an imaginary crowd becomes a metaphor for British or Western arrogance and ignorance; thus, we are reminded of Icarian myths, and the reality that British pride may come before a

fall. In this instance freedom has emerged from domination and rule and so the speeches that constitute *1000 Claps* contradict the very freedoms that they proclaim. Hence, through the synergy of aerial rope choreography and verbatim political speech, *1000 Claps* attempts to expose the illusionary and manipulative nature not only of political speech but also as embedded in the spectacle of circus. The alternating filmic shots between political speech, clapping hands and aerial work, all seek to produce an *interruption* of the illusion created by the spectacular elements within the film. By facilitating an intervention into the staging of aerial work and the staging of political speeches, *1000 Claps* works to puncture the fantasy enacted by both.

Figure 14 (Video still from performance of *1000 Claps*, 2017. Videographer Naomi Smyth)



The employment of practice-based research has been integral to this doctoral project overall. *Contra, My Brain is a Radio* and *1000 Claps* have all produced innovative findings in terms of how the three-way relationship between concept, aerial rope and text may be explored, negotiated and staged. Possibly the most significant finding of my research is the recognition that, when using aerial to critical ends, virtuosity in performance cannot be its defining factor. Aerial choreography must work to develop and drive the underlying concepts of a performance, in addition to acting in dialogue, or in synergy, with other performative elements. If aerial is to become a more usable and familiar part of the vocabulary available in the making of critical performance, we must challenge the dominant aesthetic of virtuosity associated with it, questioning what and who aerial is for. In dialogue with this necessity for questioning, the importance of employing models for contextualizing aerial performance spectacles, such as Kershaw's 'spectacles of deconstruction', is similarly crucial in the creation and reception of critical work, in addition to developing strategies for exploring aerial work beyond virtuosity (Kershaw, 2003, 595). My practice has throughout explored choreographic strategies towards this, such as the conscious inclusion of awkwardness, repetition, slow motion, and stripped-back pedestrian-style movement. In doing so, I have strived to work *with* spectacle in addition to subverting or deviating from it. These approaches have enabled new understandings of the potential role of aerial performance and its relation to text and concept; for example, as I detail in Chapter 4, in *My Brain is a Radio* the aerial choreography is utilized as a means of kinaesthetically scoring anxiety disorder. The location of that performance also influentially shaped its construction, presentation and reception: taking this and other pieces into different sites or spaces would immediately alter the interrelationships of performance elements, the experience of an audience, and in sum, a work's overall 'meaning'. My research has thus far tested aerial work in theatres, on film, and, to a limited extent, in the context of site-specific performance. Given aerial work's association with spaces such as the circus tent or theatre, continuing to test out less expected contexts for spectacular performance would offer new ways of understanding its potential. In Chapter 1 - Gendered

Spectacle, I consider the extent to which the verticality of aerial mimics the separation imposed by the film medium. However, in both of my film projects, *My Brain is a Radio* and *1000 Claps*, I exploit the use of the camera to create close-up shots of aerial work that would not be achievable with the naked eye. I suggest that in both projects, the intimate connection with the subject (me) invited by close-up film shots serves, paradoxically, to communicate and reinforce feelings of detachment communicated by the subject matter. In the case of *1000 Claps*, such duality is reinforced by the doubling and separation of my politician persona and role as an acrobat. Further, the film medium here forces consideration of how aerial choreography has been reorganised rhythmically, through the process of editing, on its own and in relation to the film work as a whole. In *My Brain is a Radio* the aerial choreography is used to complement the cadence and narration of the text, whilst *1000 Claps* explicitly puts aerial action directly in time with the clapping rhythms used throughout. In both of these examples, the aerial choreography is seen as having an integral role within the overall composition: rhythmically, visually and sonically.

The research findings I outline have been significantly shaped by my position as a solo artist/performer. Working solo has provided ample opportunities in terms of this project; however, expanding my practice to include other bodies and voices would undoubtedly open up new opportunities for research and discovery, in terms of interpersonal, spatial, sonic and conceptual relationships on the vertical and horizontal planes. In addition, undertaking further research using a variety of apparatuses other than aerial rope, such as aerial hoop (lyra), trapeze, silks, straps, Chinese pole or harness, would change or impact upon the nature of the choreographic material, and the aerial performer's relationship both to the audience and to the horizontal and vertical planes. As I have undertaken this research using only aerial rope, my discoveries are linked to the opportunities this apparatus presents spatially, choreographically and textually. Aerial rope produces a particular vertical aesthetic, which, although central to my enquiry, may not be the most useful within the context of other performance projects or ideas. Furthermore, some

performance experiments that have for me proved challenging or near impossible - such as delivering text clearly and articulately, whilst performing aerial rope choreography - might be easier or more effective on non-vertical equipment, such as hoop or trapeze, the choreography for which does not require climbing. Such limits or inabilities on my part, within this project, could present new opportunities or strategies for others engaged in similar research. What my concluding project *1000 Claps* exemplifies is that aerial is too easily limited by its historical associations and these must be unpacked in detail if we are to move forward from them. Aerialists must constantly reconsider the choreographic language they employ, in order to avoid repetition and continuously leaning on and regurgitating the same choreographic messages. We must continue our thinking around the inherent and discoverable qualities of aerial apparatus and how their spatial occupations and choreographic possibilities invite innovative modes of communication. Importantly, in the creation of critical work, the aerial choreography must affirm its value in relation to the other performance elements, not as mere window-dressing, but neither by assuming the right to centre stage.

Although I am not certain whether aerial performance can ever be truly 'free' from the myths, paradoxes and narratives of traditional circus, I propose that, by undertaking research projects such as this, it is possible to contribute new methods of creating, understanding and contextualising it. Can a discipline that operates predominantly on the vertical plane - removed from the pedestrian activity of the everyday - move decisively beyond the circus spectacle? At the very least, my research has offered innovative ways of employing such spectacles critically and in full acknowledgement of aerial work's historical relationships to social and political propaganda. In particular, the deconstructive spectacle has offered a powerful strategy for using aerial work to present complex notions of identity, the human subject and society more broadly. This research project has also evidenced the deconstructive qualities of personal testimony in conjunction with spectacular performance; such testimony becomes a point of intervention

for discussing wider social and political topics. I argue that the three-way relationship between aerial rope, text and concept, examined throughout this research, shows the beginning of a new performance language: one that goes beyond the aerial spectacles of traditional circus and that provides a fresh, relevant and productive way of engaging with our post-modern, pre-Brexit society: one that is, too often, characterized by division and instability. Within critical performance, the inclusion of intrinsically human qualities such as vulnerability or the capacity for failure is particularly pertinent, as it enables deviation from neoliberal narratives of success, achievement, beauty and perfection. As Sara Jane Bailes has argued: ‘failure challenges [...] the fictions of continuity that bind the way we imagine and manufacture the world’ (Bailes, 2011, 2). Failure is a means of demonstrating one's humanness and, rather than being a shortcoming, it can be seen to present opportunities for growth, restoration and re-establishment. In light of this, my research has strived to utilize qualities of fallibility and failure in order to counter and contextualize spectacle, and also to connect audiences with notions of vulnerability, complexity and incompleteness. Performances from other genres, including live art, dance and theatre, continue to offer useful methods and strategies with which to employ and challenge the aerial spectacle. Aerial performance as a comparatively young art form is yet to undergo crucial shifts in thinking, choreographic development and training. I argue that it is only through fostering an interdisciplinary approach to performance-making that aerial will continue to grow as a vibrant practice able to respond to evolving social and political ideas. Embracing interdisciplinarity reveals opportunities for aerial performance to build relations with other forms and other audiences, something of paramount importance with regard to its capacity meaningfully to address social and political issues. Through this research project, I have taken steps to instigate changes in the way that aerial performance, within and beyond its circus origins, is created and received. I hope to be part of a new generation of practitioners and researchers that seeks to utilize aerial practices critically and as a way to provide social commentary, intervention and reflection. By the same means, I hope that this research project is the beginning of many others which investigate

circus disciplines beyond narratives of virtuosity, formulating new methodologies for intervention, juxtaposition and reflection across personal, social and political spheres.

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## Appendix 1: Index of Aerial Choreography

\*Note to the reader: These descriptions are my own and are based on my own choreographic labelling, which may differ to that of other aerialists.

**Arm dislocations (dislocks)** - A type of dynamic beat that can be performed using either one or two arms and relies on the opening of the shoulder joints through a full range of motion. Usually performed on aerial straps or silks.

**Catchers** - A basic lock or fixed position whereby the aerial rope or silks are held in place by one bent leg and the equipment wrapped around the performers back and over their other leg, whilst the performer hangs upside down.

**Drop** - Usually refers to a fast descent in the form of a roll, slide or pivot on vertical equipment, e.g. rope, silks, Chinese pole, finishing in a controlled landing.

**Hiplock** - A basic lock in a sideways piked position, where the tail is wrapped around the performers legs and hips. Performed on aerial rope or silks.

**Hiplock Climbs** - An ascent using Hiplock (see above) where the rope or silk is rewrapped on each climb. Performed on aerial rope or silks.

**Propeller rolls/rotations** - An ascent whereby the tail of the rope or silks is fed through a self made rolling mechanism, which is looped back on itself. Performed on aerial rope or silks.

**Side Planche** - A balance where one arm is twisted behind the back with the same hand holding onto the aerial equipment. Performed on any aerial equipment.

**Slack Drop**- A drop landing in Catchers, where the performer slides into the excess slack rope or silks that they have gathered behind their back.

**Twisting Russian Climb (looped variation)** - My own adaptation of Russian Climb, which is an ascending climb that 'sandwiches' the rope between the feet, creating a kind of platform. During Twisting Russian Climb (looped variation), instead of 'sandwiching' the rope, the performer uses the tail to create a loop and then holding on with one arm, twists their body 360 degrees and regrabs the rope, whilst the rope tightens around their foot. To repeat the process the loop is removed in order to start again. Performed on aerial rope.