



Kept in Suspense

AN ANALYSIS OF OUR CULTURAL OBSESSION WITH OCCUPYING
AERIAL SPACE.

WORD COUNT – 8,275

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With thanks to Studio 202 Aberdeen, Aerial Edge Circus School, All or Nothing Aerial Dance Theatre, Kitty Velour, Tiff Finney, Dan Rosen, and especially Sandi Har, and all their students, for assisting with my research and helping me fly.

Introduction

Humans have an ancient fascination with those who can perform superhuman acts. We've taken the idea of a human who could fly, and worshipped them as gods, named celestial bodies after them, and written odysseys about their achievements, relationships and mythical lives. As a species, we do not seem satisfied with merely walking the Earth, we want to occupy the space above our heads too. As Icarus of the ancient myth ignored his father's warnings of flying too close to the sea, or too close to the sun, ultimately falling victim to his own hubris, we push our bodies to limits to taste flight. From Da Vinci's drawings of a flying machine to tales of witches turning into birds, we've engrained into our culture a fantasy of flight.

In 2019, it is easier than ever to test out your own superhero skills, as circus fitness schools pop up around the world with increasing frequency, ready to teach students of all ages circus arts from juggling to aerial tricks such as trapeze and aerial hoop. Once you begin instruction in any form of aerial dance, you are no longer limited by gravity – you can spin, drop, roll around in mid-air, no longer restricted by what rapidly becomes the boring way your body normally acts – feet on the ground, head above. I began my own aerial dance training in 2016, through a desire to take some type of exercise, and quickly fell in love with the feeling of liberation I could achieve through aerial dance. As a young woman, I became fascinated with the changes to my mind and body – aerial dance has sent me travelling across the country to conventions, to perform in showcases, to relish that final group bow at the end of a weekend of shows despite how crippling shy I was on that day in 2016 that I attended my first ever lesson. I've met my flying heroes and achieved things I didn't think were possible for me, and I am not the only one. The phenomenon of recreational circus has been well documented in media in recent years, and a flick through Instagram hashtags easily illustrate just how many, primarily women, are joining the circus subculture (#aerialhoop, my chosen specialism, has 910k posts on Instagram at time of writing). However, like me, those who do join do not do so for the fancy studio-branded jumpers, or the fun selfies with legends like Fred Deb, but rather for the addiction that is flight. All great love affairs are not without their pain, and aerial dance rips the skin of your hands and feet on ropes, leaves you black and blue with bruises, and it one point has even fractured my shoulder. Yet we go back, repeatedly. Perhaps this is narcissism – certainly, many participants take regular iPhone photographs of their training or resulting bruising to post on their social media profiles, and studies do suggest that this act of sharing one's exercise regime in detail is strongly linked to narcissism, as well as other psychological issues¹. To be in the air under your own strength, is symbolic of endurance, stamina and strength, which many cultures have recognized and adopted traditions involving various types of acts that occupy aerial space, for entertainment, religious or spiritual reasons. As the subculture of recreational aerialists grows, as do the subcultures of those practicing flesh hook suspensions, free

¹ MARSHALL, T.C, Lefringhausen, K and Ferenczi, N. (2015) *The Big Five; Self Esteem and Narcissism As Predictors of The Topics People Write About In Facebook Status Updates*. *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 85, pages 35 – 40.

running and assorted other methods of “flying” too numerous to list here. Perhaps these activities do foster a richer and deeper connection between mind and body, or of course, perhaps it’s nothing more than an addiction to the endorphins released due to your body exercising, but also in response to the pain. In the following chapters, I will examine the icon that is a human figure occupying aerial space.

Chapter One

Aerials as An Icon

The circus of the nineteenth century was remarkably different from the circus of the twenty first century. Circuses travelled by road or rail, parading through towns to drum up an audience. In the pre-cinema era, the circus provided cheap entertainment for the working classes. Of course, there were the chic circuses – for example the Parisian circus of the 1880's, the Cirque Molier – one of their acrobats was the Duke de La Rochefoucauld², which attracted the well-heeled who attended such chic circuses to be seen as much as to see the performers. This range of target audience, the affordable prices, and the family friendly entertainment meant everyone went to the circus. In a time before cinema, radio, television or even affordable music at home, the circus was the primary source of entertainment, and it came straight to your town, bringing with it huge amounts of excitement and even temporary paid work – or for the children, small tasks in return for free tickets.

Naturally, the bright colours and spectacle of the circus drew contemporary artists to depict the dynamic event. Like everything, the circus evolved and reacted to the society it found itself in – and over the years, as coal became restricted due to the World Wars and the great trains that travelled the country with the circus aboard ground to a halt, cinema and then television brought animated and real life adventures into people's living rooms and the circus found itself increasingly facing smaller audiences and higher running costs. The circus of the twenty-first century is an entirely different event. Tickets to see Cirque De Soleil, the Cirque Molier of today, perform at the Royal Albert Hall in 2019 range between £50-£150 per person³. Tickets to lesser known circuses, or circuses that still travel, are lower – tickets to see the Moscow State Circus perform in Aberdeen in 2018 cost £26 per person for standard grandstand seats⁴. Even before travel expenses or snacks, a family outing to the circus is now no-longer a cheap form of entertainment available to everyone. Yet the cultural icon of the circus endures even if the circus itself is no longer as readily available as it once was.

For the artists who attended, or indeed still attend, the circus provided a readymade subject full of drama, rich colours, and dynamic figures. With all the competition between circuses, they had to keep finding new things to pull in a paying

² SOOKE, A, *Why The Circus Fascinated Modern Artists*, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20170306-why-the-circus-fascinated-modern-artists> , March 2017, BBC News

³ Royal Albert Hall Online Box Office, <https://www.royalalberthall.com/tickets/events/2019/cirque-du-soleil-totem/>, Accurate as of 14/11/2018

⁴ Moscow State Circus Online Box Office, <https://moscowstatecircus.com/three-simple-ways-to-book/> , Accurate as of 14/11/2018

audience and continue to make a living. This meant the circus evolved at rapid rates, always fighting to be one step ahead.

“...that sense of modern momentum and need for change and innovation – of being on the edge, being up to date – attracted artists who were conscious of their own modernity, such as Renoir and Degas.”⁵

Renoir and Degas were of course Impressionists, interested in capturing light, and focusing on a move away from studio-based practice and into here-and-now, on the spot drawing. The circus provided the perfect incubator for this, as no two performances would ever be quite the same, and of course, like sunrises and lily pads and other icons of the Impressionist movement, the circus was a part of everyday life for Degas and his kin. Edgar Degas' 1879 oil painting *Miss La La At The Cirque Fernando*, and his in-the-Big-Top preparatory sketches, depicts the drama of the circus from the point of view of the audience. Whilst an artist portraying a performer at a circus now may seem rather tame, for the era of the Impressionists to portray these performers, women breaking societal norms and something as almost low-culture as many circuses were considered to be, was a very innovative move to the art audience of the 1870-1880's. The Cirque Fernando was based in the working-class Montmartre area of Paris, and Miss La La was a French acrobat, whose main trick was being hoisted to the ceiling by a rope she gripped with her teeth. Degas seems to have sympathised with those who took part in demanding physical performances and has taken great care to detail the opulent gilded decorations on the wall behind Miss La La, and her dynamic, strong body. This depiction of a woman performing, flying upwards through the air under her own strength, likely represented to Degas the modernity and up to the moment thinking he was so enchanted by, and challenged expected gender roles of the day – Miss La La was not a delicate ballerina, but a strong and robust figure. However, this figure in delicate white soaring towards the Heavens recalls earlier religious images of the Ascension of Christ – perhaps Degas using the circus to pick fun at the pious nature of painting in the past, which was a far cry from this figure, with exposed muscly legs, entertaining the masses. Degas likely knew the female performers in the circuses he frequented were the exception to the current rule, a glimpse forward into a future in which women were able to earn their own living, and express their sexuality and wear revealing clothes – all things that weren't culturally acceptable for women out with performers or prostitutes in the 1870's. For cultural context – in Hollywood, the Motion Picture Association of America forbade the display of a female navel on screen until 1966. In the circus space, clothing was revealing or tight through necessity, as even today circus performers require freedom of movement and often skin grip to be able to do what they do. For Miss La La and her contemporaries, this meant that no one questioned a circus woman's propriety due to what she was wearing in the way they may have a housewife in a similar outfit. Of course, this is not to

⁵ SOOKE, A, *Why The Circus Fascinated Modern Artists*,
<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20170306-why-the-circus-fascinated-modern-artists> ,
March 2017, BBC News

say that there was not a sexual allure to circus performers. Dominique Jando summaries this in her essay, *Venus of The Age; The Female Performer Emancipated*;

“...and a titillating one for the male audience. This factor certainly contributed to men’s interest in the circus, a show allegedly devoted to horsemanship, not to licentiousness, and, therefore, proper for gentlemen. These erotic visions were, in fact, the unspoken lure of the circus⁶”

This is important to note – Jando’s argument is that in historic, and indeed contemporary, cultural context the circus is not seen as something that has an inherent and explicit sexual draw. Circus was and still is seen as something family friendly and socially acceptable to attend, as opposed to a burlesque, strip tease or some other forms of live entertainment available. It may have negative social implications to talk freely about attending explicitly sexual shows – or Jando phrases not “*proper for gentlemen*” – but going to the circus is entirely acceptable, even if there are strong female forms performing acrobatic tricks to admire there too.

As Jando goes on to elaborate, circus performers were in tune with their own bodies, which had been well honed through years of intense training. They were brave, proud of their body and its accomplishments, and likely felt no need at all to be ashamed or hide behind modesty. The circus performer of today is much the same – proud of their body and what it is capable of, whilst oftentimes being sexualised and exotified. While it may be less taboo today than in the era of Degas, a woman who is just as physically strong and daring as her male counterparts is still often viewed as threatening, or of breaching some sort of unspoken gender norm. Even in my experience as an aerialist, it is not all together that unusual for people to comment that large muscles in shoulders or legs are bulky, or too big – but it is also not unusual to catch men staring in through the studio windows as you’re training. To watch the reaction upon the faces of people as they watch you, a woman of petite build, perform high in the air is always telling – a mixture of shock that you are capable, and immediately pushing onto this female performer their own ideas of exotification and unattainability. Perhaps Thomas Mann summed it up best in his 1909 novel *Confessions of Felix Krull*;

“To imagine her as a wife and mother was simply stupid: a wife and mother or even anyone who could be possible thought of as one, does not hang head down from a trapeze...She was an inapproachable Amazon of the realms of space beneath the canvas, high above the crowd.”⁷

The circus has contributed one other cultural icon that is arguable more enduring than any other – that of the sad clown, the tragically sad performer who still goes on stage every night to desperately try to cheer up an audience. It is of little surprise that circus folk suffered sadness – long hours, grueling labour, constant travelling and few home comforts were the life of the circus. Even today, professional circus performers

⁶ JANDO, D, *Venus of The Age; The Female Performer Emancipated*, The Circus 1870’s-1950’s, Chapter 3, TASCHEN, (2010)

⁷ MANN, T, *Confessions of Felix Krull*, Vintage, 1992

travel near constantly, are constantly training or rehearsing, and often face negative effects on their personal relationships with those who are not living the same lifestyle as them. As Granfield writes in the essay *Tent City; Back Stage At The Circus*, many circus runaways hoped to escape economic difficulty, child abuse or a lack of job opportunities in their hometown, but were not quite met with the glamorous life they hoped for;

“...[or to] escape brutal child abuse, as was the case with legendary circus owner James A. Bailey. Those who did leave their past life and follow the circus out of town often found that circus life was far from glamorous. Backbreaking toil, living conditions, “laws” within the new community, endless travel on dirt roads or sooty rail lines, and perhaps in the end even homesickness could lead many a runaway back home⁸.”

With all this hardship, and the pressure to always outdo the last performance and the rival circuses, performers regularly faced down sadness exacerbated by tiredness. Circus families began training their children in their act in the circus lot during infancy – legendary circus performers the Cristiani family spanned an extensive dynasty of spectacular riders and acrobats, by beginning their training almost as soon as they could walk. This meant few runaways would ever become performers, due to the extensive apprenticeship required, and meant many performers suffered a sadness in knowing that whilst they were incredibly skilled at their act, and their training was thorough, it was all they knew. Even today, in the context of recreational circus, people like myself may be able to train up to a level good enough to perform at the odd charity show case or wedding but will never achieve the level of skill required to join the ranks of a professional circus. A life half in and half out of the circus sphere simply will not suffice – regardless of your place in the circus, the circus always demands your full attention. Artists were attracted to this harsh reality, the humanity behind the glitzy performances. Perhaps they even identified with these people, living on the edges of society, with no fixed abode and enjoying both total freedom and simultaneously entirely tied to the community around them that sustained them. Whilst travelling circuses brought excitement and glamour with them, there was still a stigma and even a prejudice against travelling “showmen”, with a social idea that they may well be thieves, dirty or even dangerous. This was exacerbated by the circus-people’s tendency to marry and socialize with other circus people, meaning few out with that world would ever spend any real time with the travelling shows to get to know them.

Fernand Pelez captured this cycle of early training, grueling work and oftentimes toil, the life hidden behind the glamour of the performance and the flying bodies, in his 1888 painting *Grimaces and Misery – The Saltimbanques*. The painting depicts the scene just before the show begins, the performers overworked and tired, a small child crying in the corner in his circus costume. The young people to the left of the painting have almost certainly begun their training in whatever their act will be – as aerialists, or acrobats. Although their mother peeks through a curtain, no one comforts the small boy

⁸ GRANFIELD, L, *Tent City; Back Stage At The Circus*, The Circus 1870’s-1950’s, Chapter 7, TASCHEN, (2010)

as he cries into his drum – a child’s upbringing in a travelling circus was one that prepared them for their life of hard work and toil, and often their parents were simply too busy to comfort them. A group of old, weary performers are to the right, playing music, lucky simply to still have a job. This painting is a stark contrast to Degas’ *Miss La La at The Cirque Fernando*, depicting not the dynamic performing body, but rather the weary, overworked one. The parrots in their metal hoops remind me of the metal aerial hoops the aerialists would be using once the show started, though perhaps I am biased, to see my own aerial discipline in the painting. They show the exotic, the beautiful, the otherworldly in amongst this dreary, almost tragic scene of exhausted performers and a clown who simply doesn’t look happy. This simple notion is why the circus has retained its powerful cultural lure – even in 2018, the circus represents the otherworldly, the extravagant, in amongst the mundane and the everyday.

Of course, the lure of the circus as a source of inspiration isn’t just limited to the works of the Modern artists. Countless motion picture films, from Disney’s *Dumbo* to the 2017 musical *The Greatest Showman* (based loosely on the life of Barnum, and his role in the famous Barnum and Bailey circus, overlooking the more challenging aspects such as his marketing of racism to the masses and his explicit profiteering of vulnerable people because it didn’t tie in with the inspiring narrative of the movie) have brought the visions of flight into the cultural mainstream. For months after the release of *The Greatest Showman*, many people, mostly young women, arrived at the studio at which I train for beginner classes, each of them citing Zendaya’s role of trapeze artist Anne Wheeler in the film (incidentally, this character was somewhat based on real life trapeze artist Ruth Louisa McCadden) as their inspiration for wanting to partake in aerial dance classes. Following in the steps of many a circus runaway before them, few remained taking classes after the first couple of weeks – voicing disappointment at their failure to immediately have the skill required to recreate the movie or disheartened at the training schedule they were faced with, realising it would be years before they were ever able to perform a sequence or routine no one had ever done before. Indeed, during a long rehearsal session in the Aerial Edge Circus School in Glasgow, I asked where aerial silks, or *tissu* as they are correctly known, came from. It was then explained to me that in the 1980’s, Cirque De Soleil hired someone to research and develop new forms of aerial acrobatics and dance, to give their performance something other circuses would not have to boost ticket sales. By the 1990’s *tissu* had been developed – and is now one of the most popular forms of recreational aerial fitness, and indeed incredibly popular as an aerial performance too. Aerial silks is a testament to the lengths even contemporary circus will go to have something no other circus does – including hiring someone simply to develop and entirely new form of aerial dance. Many people request instruction in this art form, and few realize how incredibly difficult it is, and that there can be no safety lines or nets. Yet these young women, inspired by a movie or an image from Cirque De Soleil’s PR, serve to prove that through fine art, motion picture films, photography and cultural imagery, this icon of the aerial and circus arts is alive and well, and is still inspiring generations to run away and join it.

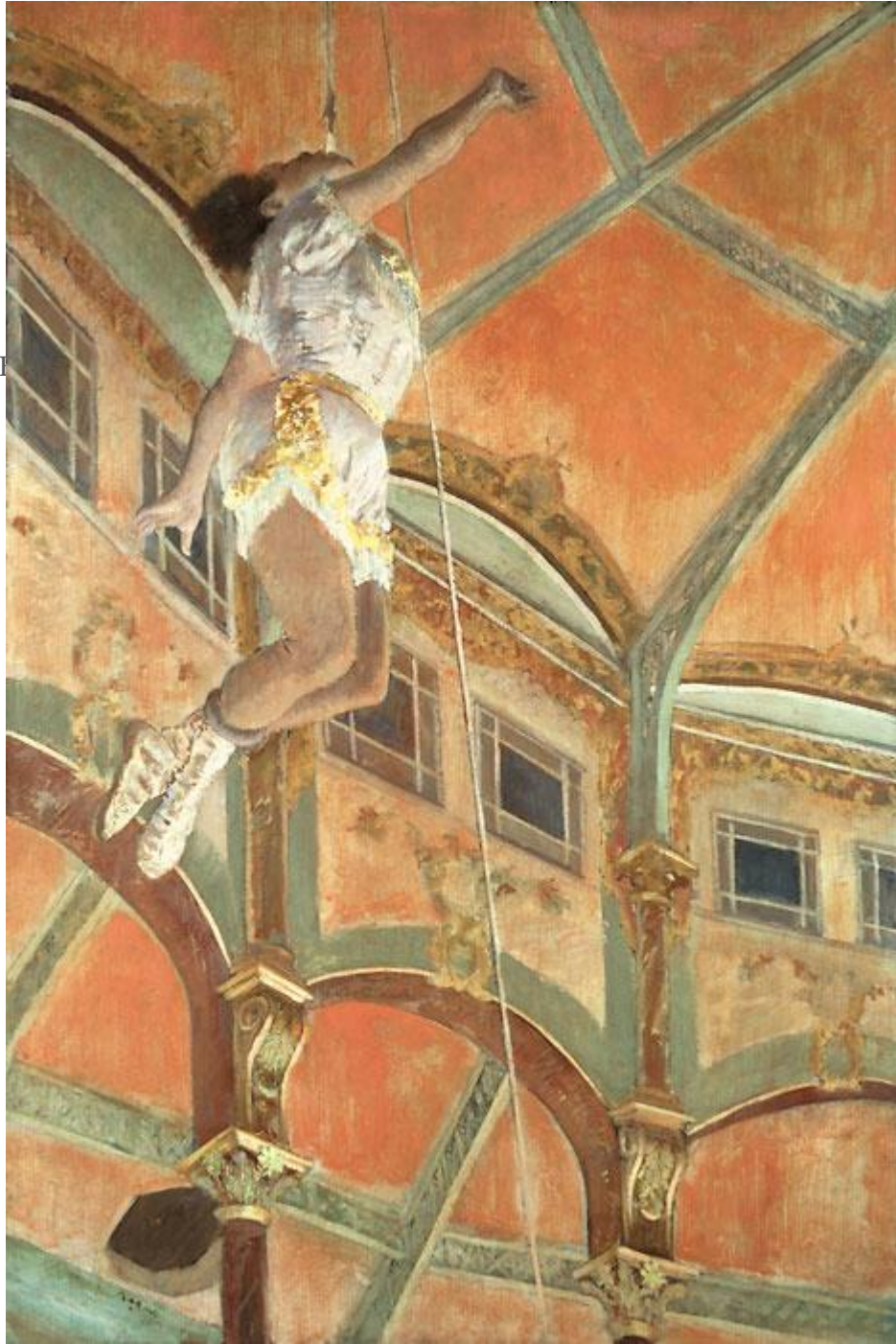


Fig.1 Degas, E, *Miss La La At The Cirque Fernando*, oil on canvas, 1879



Fig 2. Pelez, F, *Grimaces and Misery – The Saltimbanques*, oil on panel, 1888

Chapter Two

Getting Hooked and Kept in Suspense

Flesh-hook body suspension has an odd history, marred with misinformation and legend, yet it is still possibly one the most macabre ways humans have found to occupy aerial space for any length of time. A clever mixture of physics, medical knowledge, the sheer strength that the human skin has, flesh hook suspensions involve surgical steel sterile hooks being inserted through the skin, and the body is then suspended from ropes attached to these hooks. Various poses are possible – as seen in a woman who goes by the name Trigger’s YouTube channel of suspensions, her channel is known as TriggerBunny¹⁰ - and a skilled mixture of medical knowledge and circus-style rigging professionals are required to achieve a successful flesh-hook suspension. There is some academic evidence to suggest the practice was common place in Hindu life, continuing to this day during the festival of Thaipusam in Southeast Asia, amongst the Tamil people who take part in a practice known as “*vel kavadi*”, a rite in which worshippers go through some type of difficulty as a worship to the war god Marugan¹¹. Perhaps the most well-known and romanticised type of flesh-hook suspension in the Western world is the form practiced by the Native American Mandan tribe near the Missouri river – theirs was an annual celebration, during which young warriors would go through a rite of passage known as Okipa to prove their strength to their elders and their sacred spirits. As this was to prove the men’s worthiness to be the tribes warriors, steps were taken to make this process as painful as possible, including attaching weights to their limbs and forcing them to fast prior to the ceremony. The last Okipa ceremony took place in 1889¹². However, short of the referenced article providing some relatively modern examples and a few blogs claiming a 5000 year history with no substantial evidence, one cannot tell how commonplace the practice was amongst ancients, and how much the new-age movement has added in a fictional layer of legend to make the act seem more inherently primal. What we do know for certain is that flesh-hook suspension is agonisingly painful, and has been used to select the strongest in terms of physical endurance, and is today practiced amongst enthusiasts who believe suspending their body by their skin allows

¹⁰ www.youtube.com/TriggerBunny

¹¹ MARSHALL. W (2012), The Therapeutic Experience of Being Suspended by Your Skin, The Atlantic, September 2012 Issue

¹² MARSHALL. W (2012), The Therapeutic Experience of Being Suspended by Your Skin, The Atlantic, September 2012 Issue

them to think clearer, become closer to God(s), or partake in the name of an interesting piece of performance art.



Performance artist Stelarc (*Fig. 3, opposite*) works with the body, in an almost macabre way, examining the human, the transhuman and the limits of the human body, incorporating robotics and other almost cyborg-like visuals. Indeed, his canon of work includes 26 suspensions, his most recent in 2012. His performance, *Ear On Arm Suspension* (2012), involved the body being

hung 50cm above a sculpture, by 16 stainless steel hooks inserted into the skin – the body rotated one way, and then the other for around 15 minutes, before coming to a stop and being lowered back down. The performance was recorded to be played for the duration of the exhibition. Stelarc states on his website;

"The suspensions are experiments in bodily sensation, expressed in different spaces and in diverse situations. They are not actions for interpretation, nor require any explanation. They are not meant to generate any meaning. Rather they are sites of indifference and states of erasure. The body is empty, absent to its own agency and obsolete ¹³".

Stelarc wants to show a different way of interacting with the body, and with the body as an object of art. Yet – surely there is a narcissism at play here? Stelarc had the performance video recorded to be played to all who missed the performance but went to see the show, so he certainly did want people to view it, and to try to interpret it, even if he claims it was an exercise in and of itself, with no higher meaning. Perhaps Stelarc was trying to disgust his audiences or make them question why they used their time to view a person going through what could be described as a voluntary act of torture. Maybe he is making a valuable statement, not about what the body is capable of, but of why humans have such an inherent morbid curiosity enough to want to watch another do this to themselves. Stelarc's entire canon of work focuses on this morbid fascination with the human body and it's potential, his work's have included an ear being surgically transplanted into his arm (*Ear On Arm*, the first surgery for this piece was completed in

Fig 3, STELARC, 2012, stelarc.org/catID=20325

¹³ STELARC, 2012, stelarc.org/?catID=20325

2006). The artificial ear implant under the skin of his arm has a microphone which is wirelessly connected to the internet, meaning, in Stelarc's own words, "*someone in Venice could listen to what my ear is hearing in Melbourne*¹⁴". Stelarc's fascination with the post-human, the idea that one day all of us will be practically cyborgs, is at the cutting edge of contemporary technology. As his body is connected to the Internet, technically he could be hacked – but this is something he seems to view as a part of trans-human art. Afterall, Stelarc's impressive canon of previous works not only includes surgery hacking to provide himself with a third ear, but also a piece that included wireless enabled electrodes being attached to his muscles to respond to signals sent over the Internet from all over the world, causing him to move involuntarily. Whilst Stelarc's post-human vision, as Orwellian as it may be to some, he is following in the steps of Degas and Renoir as they painted the circus, in that they simply respond to the contemporary culture of the time, and the things that represent to them advancement. Stelarc as an artist does not push the human body's limitations in quite the same way that circus performers do, and nor does he suspend himself and occupy aerial space for the same reasons, yet they do share common ground in their commitment to doing something no one else has done before, in supporting advancement in their field and allowing their own body to be the method of research to allow for this advancement.

While Stelarc's flesh-hook suspension as performance art has happened in beautiful natural spaces such as beaches, as well as in traditional white cube gallery spaces, other performance artists are taking a slightly different approach to venue – such as Chinese body artist Wei Yilaien, who takes her performances into dimly lit bars in Shanghai¹⁵ (*Fig. 4, below*). Perhaps such a venue choice reflects the rapid rate at which China is imposing censorship upon its citizens through Internet blockages and Orwellian systems of rating citizens to determine how "trustworthy" they are¹⁶ which in turn has forced its thriving performance art scene underground. Therefore, taking the suspension works into a white-space public gallery is not an option for Yilaien and her kin, but rather they are forced to keep their performances away from where anyone except "those in the know" may see them. Yilaien also chooses to suspend volunteers during her performances – it is unclear, and I could not find evidence anywhere, as to if her performers pay her for this experience – thus removing herself, making herself the enabler rather than the art. This also adds an interesting difference, whilst Stelarc makes his body the object of art during his suspensions and even surgical implants, Yilaien simply enables others to make their bodies the object of art. Yilaien has staged an annual show of extreme body piercing since 2016, and those who have been suspended seem to have had varying reasons for doing so – but all go on to describe the process as a unique

¹⁴ FERNANDEZ, C (2018). *Stelarc – Making Art Out of The Human Body*, LabioTech, <https://labiotech.eu/bioart/stelarc-ear-art-human-body/>

¹⁵ LO, F & SONG, A (2018), *Hooked on Body Suspension; Extreme Art Finds Niche In China*, Reuters, www.reuters.com/article/us-china-art/hooked-on-body-suspension-extreme-art-finds-niche-in-china

¹⁶ HATTON, C (2015) *China "social credit". Beijing Sets Up Huge System*, BBC News, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-34592186

experience, with some even saying they felt calm or happy during their suspensions¹⁷. Yilaien's work, purely because of venue, shares a great deal of ground with the notorious bondage clubs of Asia, often seen now as a show simply for tourists, in which primarily women are suspended using various styles of rope bondage from the ceilings to provide a sexually titillating sight for patrons. Often these clubs also have strip shows, or other forms of live sex shows, and are generally viewed as a low brow form of entertainment at best and as straight up exploitation of vulnerable women at worst, with many writers citing that they are potentially racist as well as damaging physically and mentally to the women involved, and it has been argued that such shows are simply a post-Colonial fetishization of Asian women¹⁸. Whilst it is entirely possible that women participating in such employment do enjoy their jobs, and are actively consenting to being objectified by patrons, it could be argued they are doing so in a slightly different manner from circus performers, in that whilst they too may be suspended from a ceiling or performing some sort of acrobatic routine, their naked form is sexualized immediately and the focus of the spectator is less on the strength and choreography required and far more on the passive and submissive body of a women performing explicitly sexual acts.



However, Yilaien is a professional body piercer, and like any other professional, it seems unlikely she would work for free. As mentioned previously, there seems to be no public record of how much, if at all, her clients are paying her to be suspended. Cere Coichetti, head of the New York chapter of Rites of Passage, a group that facilitates flesh-hook suspension in

the East Coast of America, takes a different approach;

“The group performs suspensions free of charge, but ask for a suggested donation to cover the cost of hooks and other equipment. Any money Rites of Passage

Fig.4, REUTERS/ALY SONG, September 16 2018

¹⁷ LO, F & SONG, A (2018), *Hooked on Body Suspension; Extreme Art Finds Niche In China*, Reuters, www.reuters.com/article/us-china-art/hooked-on-body-suspension-extreme-art-finds-niche-in-china

¹⁸ KELLEY, K (2015), *Patriarchy, Empire and Ping Pong Shows: The Political Economy of Sex Tourism in Thailand*, Digital Commons @ Colombia College Chicago, https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1010&context=cultural_studies

receive in excess of the suggested donation goes to sending the group's members to certification courses in first aid and industrial rigging¹⁹"

Coichetti and his fellow Rites of Passage members seem to view suspension as a commodity – that the heady mixture of physical pain, endorphins and adrenaline can create an almost spiritual, freeing feeling. Rites of Passage seem to have an outlook less about how shocking or lurid their suspensions can be, and rather about what the person being suspended can get out of the experience. Much like my own personal experiences with aerial dance – the feeling of freedom, leaving on a high, having people question *why* you keep going back if you are going through so much pain with bruising from the ropes, strops and bar, or rather in the case of flesh-hook suspensions, the risk of infection and skin tears. In his study, *In Pursuit of Happiness; Why Pain Helps Us Feel Pleasure*, Dr Brock Bastian explored why certain physically painful experiences can make us happy, causing what is called colloquially “runner’s high”. He offered his colleagues a piece of candy, or a highlighter pen. Half of his colleagues were offered this after they had held their hand in a bucket of iced water, half were offered this without experiencing any discomfort – and the people who had not experienced pain took the highlighter pen 74% of the time, whereas the people who had experienced pain took the candy 60% of the time. He concluded that the candy became more appealing, because pain causes us to enjoy pleasures more – *“pain literally brings us more in touch with our immediate sensory experience of the world, allowing for the possibility that pleasures can become more pleasant and more intense²⁰”*. In this study, Bastian also explored emotional pain – how pain can help us bond with others.

“Painful ceremonies have been used throughout history to create cooperation and cohesion within groups of people. A recent study examining one such ritual – the kavadi in Mauritius – found that participants who experiences pain were more likely to donate money to a community cause²¹”

Bastian also makes a reference to the immense community outpourings we see in the aftermath of catastrophic events, such as natural disasters. The flesh-hook suspension community is close knit, as is the aerial dance community. Both groups of people seek to occupy aerial space and face physical pain and mental hardships in their pursuit of being able to remain in the air. The reason we keep going back to experience pain, is rooted in the rush of endorphins our brains fire at us to help us cope with the fear of being off the ground and ease the pain – and our shared experiences of this makes it literally easier for us to make friends. Coichetti of Rites of Passage, New York, alludes many times in interviews to the group mentality and ability to change life suspension has, and in my own experience, the men and women I train with are kind, generous and likely to share their food, candy and even clothes with their fellow aerialists. Ultimately,

¹⁹ MARSHALL, W (2012), *The Therapeutic Experience of Being Suspended by Your Skin*, The Atlantic, September 2012 Issue

²⁰ BASTIAN, B (2017), *In Pursuit of Happiness; Why Pain Helps Us Feel Pleasure*, Psychology Today, posted June 22 2017

²¹ BASTIAN, B (2017), *In Pursuit of Happiness; Why Pain Helps Us Feel Pleasure*, Psychology Today, posted June 22 2017

we are united as a group not only because we have experienced the same things, but because of the psychophysical effects these experiences have on our bodies. However, subjecting our bodies to pain, or harming them in the name of performance art, or performing art, or recreation, is not without controversy. In a way, it is a sort of arrogance, and disabled artist and campaigner Anne Whitehurst, who has had rheumatoid arthritis since birth, marks it as an “indulgence” when able-bodied people hurt themselves in their work. The argument against such a practice is two-fold – one could argue, such as Whitehurst does, that it is indulgent to push a perfectly healthy body into pain through choice when so many people are facing pain every day through no choice of their own, and indeed that it takes something away from those who do face pain without a get-out clause, that able-bodied people risk causing permanent damage to themselves in the pursuit of a high, to get closer to a deity simply for a round of applause.

Chapter Three

What Does It Mean to Occupy Aerial Space?

For the sake of writing, I am defining “aerial space” as being the space between the top of our heads and the ceiling/sky. This is the same space aerial dancers and suspension artists occupy.

In 2018, we encounter more objects occupying aerial space than ever before – as rents rise, apartments are getting smaller and people find more creative ways to store things without taking up floor space, thus leading to hanging storage units, flower pots or even artwork from ceilings. Telephone and powerlines cut across our heads in cities and in the rural landscape. Some commercial art galleries even provide buyer guides²², recommending suspended sculpture to buyers who lament at seeing the perfect pieces of work yet knowing their home or office does not have enough floor space to display it. However, this begs the question – *what does occupying aerial space mean?* From these prementioned examples, it seems fair to say we occupy aerial space with objects for two reasons;

- We do not have sufficient space for the object on the floor, or it would be inconvenient to us to have to step around it (for example, suspending flowerpots in a space limited apartment)
- It is safer, or deemed more aesthetically pleasing, or is demanded by technology that this object occupies aerial space (for example, suspending telephone or power lines above a city)

However, when we consider that it is not an object being suspended in aerial space, but rather a living, breathing human – does this change what it means? Aerialists I know seem to fall into both the reasons given above as to why they occupy aerial space, in that some have found it a convenient way to keep fit and continue their love for dance despite living in small places, because so long as there is a high ceiling, or even a garden with a tree, they can rig up an aerial hoop or trapeze. Others find the full body movement and balance of aerial dance to be soothing, or to particularly find the lines one can make in aerial space to be aesthetically pleasing, or some I train with regularly have commented to me that they feel that aerial dance allowed them to gain a new perspective on the body during their dancing training. Lindsey Butcher, artistic director of aerial dance company Gravity & Levity wrote in her 2014 The Guardian article²³;

“...aerial dance immediately removes that limit [of traditional dance] by allowing the body to be suspended anywhere between the floor and the rigging point.

²² <https://www.sybariscollection.com/art-history-beauty-suspended-sculpture/>

²³ BUTCHER, L, *Dancing On The Ceiling*, The Guardian, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2014/apr/14/dancing-ceiling-aerial-artform-circus>

This provides a new spatial awareness and orientation for the performer that also offers the audience an alternative perspective”

Butcher touches on an interesting point – by essentially turning the dancefloor upside down, the audience can appreciate a new perspective, and it also eliminates the traditional problem of certain areas of the auditorium being unable to see the performers on the stage. As aerial dance only requires a rigging point, and a performer, groups such as Edinburgh based All Or Nothing Aerial Dance Theatre have brought their aerial performances out onto the sides of public buildings for Christmas Lights festivals and are scheduled to perform at the re-opening of the Aberdeen Music Hall²⁴. This allows the audience to view and interact with a performance in the way traditional forms of dance, such as ballet, may not be able to be showcased. During recent performances in Aberdeen, myself and other aerial dancers chose to perform on aerial apparatus rigged in such a way that special carabiners allowed the apparatus to spin, so that the audience members could see the act from lots of different angles during each set.

Yet with this distancing between the audience and the performers, there are concerns raised that this may be objectifying to the performers as their bodies are suspended several feet in the air for all to see, whilst being distant enough to not really be engaging or showing any personality to the audience. Many feminist authors have written their objections to this, claiming this contributes to “raunch culture” and the objectification of women, and that both of these things drive what they perceive to be a culture of rape and violence against women, and therefore women self-objectifying by allowing themselves to perform and be seen in such a way is inherently contributing to a much larger problem^{i*}. However, from attending many conventions, classes and workshops dedicated to the circus arts I can confirm there are mostly women attendees – however many feel far from that they are contributing to any type of objectification. I have met women who came to the circus arts to lose weight, to regain confidence after childbirth or relationship breakdowns, or to ease their mental health problems. They do not see themselves as a threat to women’s rights – but rather that their ability to learn and perform aerial dance is an affirmation of women’s rights, because no one can tell them they can’t wear costumes or dance as they please. I recall clearly one instructor at the Aerial Edge Circus Convention (Aerial Edge, Glasgow, September 2018) rebuking a student’s questions about if what we were doing could ever be considered feminist by pointing out that ballerina’s wear leotards and a specific type of footwear, yet no one is questioning their legitimacy as performers or their role in the objectification of women.

2018 marks 250 years of the circus as we would recognize it today – 1768 was a culturally very different time in Britain, but it was the year that showman Philip Astley “laid out a 42 foot ring with a piece of rope²⁵”, and watch the modern circus take life in London, near Waterloo. The anniversary was marked with operas and art exhibitions, whilst archives and orchestras and designers all joined in the celebrations – and of

²⁴ All Or Nothing Aerial Dance Theatre, official website, www.aerialdance.co.uk

²⁵ BIRKETT, D (2017), *The Circus Was Born in Britain 250 Years Ago – And I’ll Never Regret Running Away to Join It*, The Telegraph, 26/12/2017

course, lots of circus performances. I enjoyed every second of the celebrations I was able to attend last year, but what I relished living through even more was the real effort made for the first time by archivists, historians, and contemporary circus practitioners and enthusiasts to acknowledge how many contributions women had made to the modern circus in its 250 year history, and how few had ever received any recognition for those incredible achievements. Circus250, the banner under which the anniversary celebrations took place, even pointed out that Astley's wife was there with him on that day modern circus was born – she was an experienced equestrian performer in her own right but had been edited out of the history book. Many women took the opportunity to use Circus250 as an opportunity to tackle for further equality in the gender representation within the contemporary circus, with Lina Johansson, one of the artistic directors for *Mimbre*, a female led circus stated in an interview with The Stage;

“...circus has always been innovative. It's always been the rule breaker. [And a version of that history which keeps women in the footnotes] creates barriers for the mind²⁶.”

During the same interview, another woman named Martha Harrison who is trained as a trapeze flyer, and also works alongside *Mimbre* and the National Centre for Circus Arts discusses how she has published academic papers discussing the gendered bias within circuses, and her and her contemporaries belief that it is the responsibility of the circus to tackle gender disparity at every level – from professional to amateur, from the types of roles women can expect to get to the wording used in job advertisements. Indeed, during the 250th anniversary year, the *Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain* (*World Festival Of The Circus of Tomorrow*) became wrapped in a heated controversy over its lack of female performers. Whilst there may indeed still be work to do about the objectification of female circus performers, and even accusation of sexism and the usage of sexist gender norms within circus performances, the women themselves are proving themselves more than capable of fighting back at every level, and expressing their limitations, and worth.

I spend around 6 hours a week minimum in that aerial space between the top of one's head and the ceiling. Being up there, safely in my hoop, has become a place of sanctuary for me – yet I also know too well the feelings of total exposure, looking out from the rigging to realize you're incredibly exposed, that everyone in the room can see you. There is nowhere to hide in aerial space, no quick exits through a door and no curtains to hide behind if you fail to execute one of your tricks. To occupy aerial space is to experience a moment where everything is exposed, yet your concentration must be entirely on the matter at hand because one false move will send you tumbling back towards the floor. Perhaps in here lies one of the reasons so many young people are falling in love with aerial dance – in a society in which distraction is the norm in the form of an iPhone, Netflix or social media, aerial dance provides a moment of grounding in which nothing matters except the knowledge people are watching and the focus to

²⁶ WICKER, T(2018), *Women In Circus*, The Stage,
<https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/2018/circus-at-250-women-in-circus/>

perform safely. Occupying aerial space through aerial dance and circus arts is being increasingly used as therapy for this reason – we as performers are utterly dependent on each other, forming strong bonds and friendships through shared experiences, whilst experiencing something that forces us to switch off to the distractions and sensory stimulus of the everyday world. From those affected by the Grenfell Tower disaster²⁷, to people with Autism and other sensory challenges²⁸, occupying aerial space allows for freedom and healing for people from many walks of life. Watching people gain confidence, push their bodies to achieve what they are truly capable of and go from shy people to performers is the greatest joy I get from taking part in the circus. This form of type of circus as therapy, and the physiological effects of pain, exercise and group bonding is very similar to the flesh-hook suspension artists of Shanghai and New York, and also shares common ground with artists such as Stelarc and his interest in seeing how far the human body can go to achieve a goal – regardless of if that goal is to bio-hack oneself, achieve a new level of spiritual and mental peace or push your body to a new level of strength.

*ⁱ*Many circus schools also teach recreational pole dancing, and there are aerial dance disciplines such as aerial pole on which pole-dancing moves are performed on a metal pole suspended from the ceiling. For this reason, many authors refer simply to “pole-dancing studios” when discussing aerial dance, and others refer to “aerial dance” when discussing pole-dancing. The terms are used loosely and interchangeably even by circus enthusiasts using online forums and message-boards. The topic is further complicated by the similarity of costumes worn by some aerial dancers and pole-dancers, such as sequins, Pleaser high heels with clear plastic platforms and fishnet tights.*

²⁷ BATEMAN, J, *Circus Therapy For Children Affected by Grenfell*, Inside Housing, 14/12/2017, <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/circus-therapy-for-children-affected-by-grenfell-53574>

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Conclusion

Or As The Circus Says, “See You On The Road”

The subculture of recreational aerial dance has expanded rapidly, and it is still growing quickly. These skills are borrowed and then shared back to other forms of aerial activity – such as theatre high lines, flesh hook suspension artists who consult circus rigging experts and indeed, new and developing forms of aerial dance apparatus, often custom built and commissioned by performers to contribute something new and different to their acts. These are borrowed and shared between performing artists, body modification professionals and fine artists, and it truly seems that no one group of people truly “owns” the apparatus or aerial space itself.

Some many consider the act of occupying aerial space to be inherently narcissistic, regardless of if the backdrop is a white cube gallery such as Stelarc, or a repurposed military drill hall, such as All or Nothing Aerial Dance Theatre in Edinburgh. It is debated that causing pain during a performance of any kind is a narcissistic act, gloating at what one can endure, regardless of if the pain is merely some bruising, or cuts from steel surgical hooks, fractures from aerial dance going wrong or in extreme cases even full surgical implants. Others may consider aerial dance and its related activities to be objectifying to the performers and contributing to a culture that encourages people to look at (particularly) women as nothing more than objects, by suspending them high above an audience, untouchable yet entirely on show.

Yet I hold steadfastly to my belief that to simplify the act of occupying aerial space down into a merely narcissistic one is hugely overlooking the many and varied reasons people may have for coming to the art form, including the use of recreational circus as therapy, as confidence building and as a form of fitness in a society that often forces women to feel unwelcome or unsafe in conventional gyms. To me, the benefits people can acquire from learning aerial dance, or perhaps even from trying a flesh hook suspension, seem to outweigh any potential narcissistic detriment – and even if young women *are* in part going through this training to be able to keep up an Instagram account dedicated to aerial dance, in the face of a population suffering from rising obesity rates and poor mental health due in no small part to unhealthy lifestyles, I believe that those choosing to exercise and keep fit should be encouraged, not demonised. Objectification is a deeply nuanced and I believe personal thing – in my own experience, I have felt more objectified by doctors, and even customers during shifts working in retail, than I have ever felt performing for even the most provocative of crowds. If anyone, regardless of gender, wishes to dance in the air under their own power, or undergo a flesh-hook suspension or even a bio-hacking, then they are the one in control of that choice, their own personal limits regarding how much of their body is displayed, the context in which this act is executed and their own personal physical and mental limitations. This control, to me and many other aerial dancers, is the difference between any supposed objectification and a hobby that allows us to be in complete control of the situations and dances we find ourselves in.

The occupation of any type of aerial space is a gendered issue in many ways – the leaders of flesh-hook suspension collectives tend to be men, yet women such as TriggerBunny are suspended. Bondage suspensions tend to be targeted at a largely male audience, yet female artists such as Yilaien are breaking into territory traditionally used

for such shows and suspending men. The breaking down of gender norms, and of the male gaze and societal ideas of a submissive and passive female meters above a crowd may take more than a few Instagram hashtags to achieve, but slowly, and from the inside of the subcultures involved, change is occurring.

Just as the circus performers of Degas much loved Cirque Fernando broke gender and social norms of their day, as do circus performers of 2019. In the face of fourth wave feminism and identity politics we still dance in clear bottomed shoes borrowed from exotic dancers and perform tricks first executed by women able to earn their own living in the 1880's, when such a thing was simply not as common as it is now. We, as a group, fully acknowledge where every aspect of our culture came from, and seek only to push it further forwards, to repackage the circus in a modern, accessible way. This goal has led to the opening of countless circus schools, of mainstream newspapers chipping in their opinions for or against what the recreational circus community does, and of large-scale international conventions – and the greater the exposure, the more voices and opinions begin to be heard. Yet as the circus has for centuries, regardless of opinions – the show will continue to go on, and to inspire more artists, photographers and performers.

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