

Collection Images of outdoor performance

Aesthetics of the contemporary circus

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Presentation

In France, circus performances are becoming more numerous and more diverse with each passing year. Some 400 creations are now being performed, proving just how rich the artistic landscape has come to be. This dvd hopes to provide a brief survey of this landscape with both a widespread view as well as a few significant landmarks.

Its theme is the "contemporary circus" (it does not discuss traditional circus), and it takes its examples from among the shows performed in France in 2007.

It underlines the six trends that strongly mark the current period.

Three of them concern the genre's evolution.

Although not long ago the circus tent was synonymous with the circus, today it has become a minority practice (**The circus tent : a choice**). A large number of "mono-disciplinary" shows highlight one artistic discipline (**From the circus to the circus arts**). A large number of shows go against common codes currently in practice (**Outer circus**).

Three other trends concern the evolution of artistic ideas.

The revival of critical questioning (**Social calling**), the appearance of ferocious and burlesque clowns (**Oddball comedy**), the outbreak of very visual and/or choreographic forms (**Graphic movements**).

Some 30 show excerpts illustrate these six ideas, seeing as most of the examples could represent several of the themes discussed.

From the circus to the circus arts

The art of acrobatics has existed for six thousand years, juggling for four thousand years, and the clown and equestrian arts date back to the dawn of civilization. At the end of the 18th century these disciplines and some others that were spawned from them, were progressively drawn into the circus ring, where they found an unprecedented momentum and received the label of *circus arts*.

In the 1980s, for the sake of developing the *new circus*, one by one these arts freed themselves of the circus ring and gave birth to full-length, mono-disciplinary shows, generally intended for the stage.

Jugglers and clowns were the trailblazers, with solo and duo performances, and eventually presented pieces bringing together a large number of performers. We might classify these pieces as "ballets", as Jérôme Thomas has categorised with his *Rain/Bow*.

Assuming the air of a manifesto for some performers, this autonomy within the circus arts aims to establish their individual, expressive strength. It is from hereon in a custom, and is present in even the most unique specialities (Chinese pole, BMX, diabolo, cloud swing, etc.)

Outer Circus

The art of the circus is in mixing. It is a multimedia genre, like the opera or the cinema. By first juxtaposing the circus arts and music, it has created a new hotchpotch of disciplines within the last thirty years of the 20th century.

At present, each speciality mixes equally with the theatre (especially silent theatre) and dance, and has increasingly come to mix with previously unfamiliar means of expression, such as video, cinema, puppetry, and the visual and digital arts.

A growing number of choreographers and directors have, in parallel, begun crossbreeding their own creations with the circus. This process has led to shows that are “out-of-the-norm”, and defy all classification. However, some performers, like Christophe Huysman, do not hesitate to simply classify them as *circus*. Others prefer to call these shows visual theatre, while some object to using the word *circus*, without denying their origins in the circus arts.

Together, they create an *outer circus*, which could also be called *outer dance*, or *outer theatre*, depending on one’s point of view.

The circus tent: a choice

The *new circus* of the 80's did away with most of the circus codes of the day (thus making them part of the *traditional*, or *classical circus*). But it has also adopted one of these codes' principal canonical symbols; that of the travelling tent. However, since the 90's, hardly 20 percent of companies perform under canvas.

Performing under a tent does not theoretically exclude variety of form. Yet one cannot help but notice that most performers who choose the circus tent promote an "aesthetic of the familiar", by creating a convivial and intimate relationship with the audience, evoking familiar themes (a gypsy-like, fairground ambiance that is rustic or coarse, with scenes from everyday life), or using simple and basic means.

Faithful to the architectural definition of the circus as a "central playground space" (Philippe Goudard) with "multiple points of view" (Johann Le Guillerm), these circuses mostly present multi-disciplinary, circular shows (with the exception of the Cirque Plume). They often remain attached to the mounting of the feat itself, which simply stands on its own, or contributes to a certain atmosphere, as in the Cirque Rasposo, or to serve a radical message, as with Cirque Ici.

Oddball Comedy

The circus' main comic figure is found in the Auguste clown. This figure has resisted with the *new clowns*, like Ludor Citrik, who have remained as audacious as ever and revived the ferocity (irreverence, immodesty and monstrosity) that the *traditional circus* was beginning to feel it should tone down.

But the red nose no longer holds a monopoly. The circus' comic figure has diversified. As seen with Philippe Goudard or Nikolaus, he juxtaposes different registers, being simultaneously paradoxical, eccentric, cheeky, burlesque, ridiculous, zany, satirical or absurd.

Unlike the more media-friendly humorists, these "clowns" are not looking for applause or the easy laugh, but wish to be abundantly excessive, breaking social codes until it becomes almost unbearable. To this end, they cleverly play with the audience's familiarity with a genre thought of as repetitive, inoffensive and of minor importance.

Always staying within the paradox of nearly superhuman skill (let's remember that they are often excellent acrobats) and deadly ridiculousness, the "circus laugh" is a serious art, taking for its target the spirit of seriousness, which is a threat to any art. Let there be no mistake, this art awakens our terrors and pipedreams, without ever curing us of them!

Graphic movements

In their attempts to rise above performance for performance's sake, some artists work toward the advent of the *beautiful* or *meaningful* by way of form. The goal is, as it has been for many visual artists and contemporary dancers, to call into serious question the codes of practice, even questioning the existence of "art for art's sake". This recent trend breaks away from the narrative codes of the *new circus*, and renews the immediateness of the *traditional circus'* body on display, stripped, of course, of its flashy theatrical presentation. This pursuit rests most often on two distinct yet seemingly compatible positions.

The first aims for "visual poetry" and the "magic of shapes". This technique, when it does not throw audience members into the dizzying world of concepts, leaves them with continual graphic images, as in *Plus ou moins l'infini*. The second is inspired in choreography, and aims for purity in gesture and movement, without necessarily compromising the notion of character. The role of the body becomes all the more meaningful.

Grace and visual abstraction are hardly incompatible with a critical eye on the world, as we find, for example, in the work of Jean-Baptiste André.

Social calling

Following the road taken by the predecessors of the *new circus* in the 1970's, certain performers already see their art as the shaping of a message, an idea, or even a thesis. From this point of view, they share with colleagues of other artistic disciplines the idea that art must play a social or political role.

This ambition can lend itself to very diverse aesthetic visions. Some are "relational", like that of the clown Proserpine going to meet inhabitants of a land in order to "make links there". Others play with the distance between the stage and the house to relate with the audience members regarding the injustice of unemployment (*Base 11/19*), the difficulties of hyper-competitiveness (*100% croissance*), the ever-present media (*Zapptime # Remix*), or disease (*Déversoir*)...

The "extraordinary" skills of the circus artists are put to use to amplify and distinguish, with the power of authenticity, the calling to which they are so committed.