



ACADEMY OF MUSIC AND DRAMA

About tricks, sensations and relationships

A collection of thoughts on performing, exhibiting skill and creating in contemporary circus.

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ABSTRACT

This is a reflection and exploration of creation as a contemporary circus artist today, from the point of view of the same (I am a rope walker). To give myself a compass during the research I have worked with a few questions:

What is the function of the trick?

How do I and other artist relate to our creating selves and bodies? And how can we use knowledge from other fields such as marketing- and social psychology or service side jobs, to look at our creation from another angle?

These questions are explored through looking into marketing- and social psychology, the words of other creators, doing interviews and looking at the way I interact with the practice myself. What my itch is. How working with the body can change the organism.

Key words:

Contemporary circus, social psychology, physical theatre, slack rope, street shows, stage art, audience interaction, performance.

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The start

I often ask myself what it is all about. Like many artists, or at least I think it is as many artists, I often think about what makes creation feel so important. What are the reasons that we keep on doing the same exercises, kneading the same questions again and again? I often tell myself I want to communicate. That I want to play a game with the audience, that I want to pull them into a world beside the world we live in. I guess it is partly true. I want to play, and I want to propose new places for the mind to linger. But I also think that I want to fall in love. I want that intense moment to happen, where them and I work as one collective entity. Feeding of each other's energy like lovers do. I want the world to be wondrous, mendable, exciting. On a stage, I can propose the game. I can lure the loving gaze out of people. I can open the door into a thought and invite them in. If they trust me and want it.

I recently visited a garden in the south of Sweden¹, where the growing of crop and planning of land seemed to be done with the same accuracy a dancer uses to lift her arm. It could have been something else that caught me than the slack rope and my body. Like them, I could have

¹ Mandelmanns trädgårdar, fall of 2019.

placed my passion in a way of drawing, a teaching job or a garden. Now it was a training hall I stepped in to.

What you are holding in your hand is a collection of sketches and questions, half and fully followed traces of me looking for ways into enlarging the game, the in-love-falling, ways of us reaching each other through the limit of a stage. It contains ideas of people I have met on the way that seemed to carry something magical. I have told people it is a project about finding cross paths where social psychology and audience interaction meet. It is part of it. I have also been wondering about how I can balance the longing for technical precision with the needs of the creation as the main goal. Another part is finding ways of opening the game, altering the audiences gaze or my own. Sometimes through social psychology, other times through clowning, acting, speaking, thinking or moving. I haven't covered gardening. I guess gardening can come when it comes. I propose you read it as a field study in its most original sense. A notebook that let you stroll around an area and understand what it is made up of. Or at least what it is partly made up of. Or, if not understanding what it is made of, at least some time to study the different bits. Read it from the start to the end, or a little here and there. Add things in your copy. Ignore what is not true for you. As in any collection of thoughts, the pages you hold in your hands are proposals, starts of conversations, things to be continued. Read it, think of it and then do with it what you please.

Introductions

There are a few people I would like to introduce you to before we start, to give you a bit of an overview of who I am actually citing, and in what context we have been speaking, or they have been writing.

Maja Nilsson is a street- and rope artist, based half of the year in Europe, and half of the year in Hawaii. She has a background in contemporary circus but after a back injury she dropped out of her bachelor in circus at Dans Och Cirkus Högskolan (DOCH) in Stockholm, and started performing on the streets of Copenhagen instead. Now she does street shows all over Europe, as well as acts on traditional stages. We spoke on a half bad skype connection a warm Hawaiian morning, and a chilly Swedish night in the beginning of March. It resulted in the text called Maja Nilsson, a boiled down version of her thoughts on performing, the street, and the agreements you make with your audience. You can find the full interview as the attachment with her name.

Tom Brant is a circus performer specialized in vertical rope, educated at DOCH as well and one of the founding members in the circus company *Svalbard*. He is originally from Hamburg, based in Stockholm and at the moment he is obsessing over the gravity and other push- and pulls between the floor, the rope and the body.

We spoke in France, during our residencies at the circus center *Mothleon*. You can find our full conversation in the audio file called Tom Brand, the result of a long talk on a set of stairs in the spring sun. Although it is an attachment, a recording and not a written text, I recommend you to listen to it. It is in Swedish. And Tom Brant has a lot of interesting things to say about the trick, artistic research and what it means to create.

Cecilia Lagerstöm is a director, writer and teacher at Högskolan för Scen och Musik in Gothenburg. She works with stage art and research simultaneously, and is the main supervisor for this thesis. She has discussed its directions and gave it feedback and cheered it on when it was closer to the trashcan than a finished project.

Cille Lansade is a circus artist, actor and director, based in France and part of the company *Anomalie & ...*. Most of this thesis is written in the residency center she is running with the other members called Monthleon. Here I spent half of the day writing, and half of the day discussing with or working on the floor with Lansade. Those sessions have sneaked into the introduction and most of the texts regarding my thoughts on tricks, expression and artistic choices on stage. The text *in Cilles kitchen* is one of them.

Bauke Lievens is the author of *Open Letters to the circus*. She studied Theatre Studies at UGent (BE) and Philosophy of Contemporary Art at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (ES). She is a lecturer and researcher with the Drama department of KASK School of Arts (Ghent, BE), where she is currently working on the two-year artistic research project *The Circus Dialogues*, together with circus artists Quintijn Ketels (BE) and Sebastian Kann (USA/DE). Lievens works with various circus, dance and theatre companies and her *Open Letters to the circus* addresses many of the questions I have had on circus as an art form throughout the years. You can read them at <https://www.circusdialogue.com/open-letters-circus-1>. I strongly recommend you to do so.

Robert Cialdini is an American professor in social science at Arizona state university. In 1984 he wrote the book, *Influence – the Psychology of Persuasion*, in which he studied the art of persuasion in the lab, by taking car-dealer jobs, and serving at restaurants. Later he was one of the (many) people advising Barack Obamas presidential campaign². I was introduced to his literature during a half time course called *Marketing psychology and the art of persuasion* at Lund university. The book I have used for this thesis is not his first, but a Swedish translation of *Influence: Science and Practice*. The cover of my copy is full of his methods applied, and it has turned out to sell quite well.

Elliot Aronson is a psychologist who has researched cognitive dissonance. He holds a PhD in Psychology from Stanford University and is the author of *The Social Animal* and has stated

² Benedict Carey, “Dream team of behavioral scientists advised on Obama campaign” New York Times, November 12, 2012, accessed April 2 2020
<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/13/health/dream-team-of-behavioral-scientists-advised-obama-campaign.html> 04.04.20

that “people who do crazy things are not necessarily crazy”, pointing towards the situational factors that influence behaviors that from the outside seems deranged. His literature was part of the same course I took at Lund University, *Marketing psychology and the art of persuasion*, and has been my main way into understanding some of the principals of social psychology.

On the trick

On the rope, I keep on twisting and turning the routine I already have. I am in a cold city, using borrowed time in a conference room without windows, alone and out of context. I feel as if I am finally caught, hesitantly holding up the image of myself as a person of extraordinary powers, no longer believing in the circus artist I have myself claimed to be. Instead, full of the fake I have been avoiding.

Living up to the amazing. Or maybe more than that - selling the amazing. The glitter in my suit and a trick to blow your mind with. It might be an old and rather outdated idea, but I have found it resilient. The actual glitter might be occasional, but the notion of amazing is still there.

There is nothing wrong with amazing. Amazing is amazing. But amazing can feel like a mental trap. If we go to see something to be amazed, will we be open to anything but that specific sensation? Can I as an artist be simultaneously fantastic and absolutely free in my expression? In theory, yes, but something seems to create a stutter when working with double goals like that.

In a conversation with a dancing colleague I am introduced to the idea of form as a focus. She compares circus to ballet, and the way shapes and figures becomes the most important elements on stage. How the choreographies might be put together around a story or theme, but how they are mainly built to serve the “craftsmanship”, prioritizing the esthetics over the needs in the story.³

When looking into the history of circus there are a few different paths, most of them occupied with the presence of skill, and our history as skill-based performers. A common way of seeing the birth of circus, in a modern western context, goes something like this:

³ Conversation with Tuva Hildebrand the fall of 2019. Hildebrand is a dancer, actor and performer, and during this MA one of the people I have been discussing the topics of this thesis with, and who's conversations has helped me on a long way.

In 1768 the former cavalry-sergeant Philip Astley, based in London, decided to do shows in trick-riding, and as trick riders before him created a circular stage for his performances. By the start of the 1770s he was so famous for his shows that he could bring in novelty performances such as jugglers, ropewalkers and clowns, creating a performance similar to the ones we call traditional circus.⁴ These performers were trained, which means the skills used in circuses have history beyond Astley, but Philip Astley's shows are counted as the first format where the skills were combined in a way that we would call circus today.

What is clear is that historically, circus has been occupied with the exhibition of technique and its artists has been described as “skilled workers who sold their physical abilities to the circus director”⁵

In her *Open Letters to the circus* dramaturg and researcher Bauke Lievens argues that this exhibition of skill might be form-based, but this form was full of expression. The technique-based shows spoke about the cultural narratives of the time, such as the idea of progress, and human superiority. The traditional circus is not at all an art form without a voice in Lievens's eyes, rather a frame, a way to reinforce a particular worldview. She also points out that this particular worldview is still present in the circus of today. As artist, we might be unaware of it. But according to Lievens it is unavoidably there.⁶

What is often missing is the understanding that the mastering of technical skill (the form) expresses that old, traditional vision of Man, and of the world in general. What we present on stage are heroes and heroines, often without any critique or irony, in a way that is anachronistic and implausible in the context of our post-modern, meta-modern or even post-human experiences of the world surrounding us. Our contemporary Western world can no longer be bound together by one big story, nor by the belief that one coherent narrative can give meaning to our experience of that same world; attempts to do this generally come across as trite or naive, or as escapist fantasies.⁷

⁴ Dominique Jando, “short history of the circus”, Circopedia, Accessed 25 of March 2020
http://www.circopedia.org/SHORT_HISTORY_OF_THE_CIRCUS

⁵ Bauke Lievens, “Open letters to the circus”, Circus Dialogue, December 8 2015, accessed 22 of December 2019
<https://www.circusdialogue.com/open-letters-circus-1>

⁶ Lievens, “Open letters to the circus”

⁷ Lievens, “Open letters to the circus”

I think about this one evening while standing in the shower: If we collectively, as a society, have left the idea of the dominant human and the survival of the fittest, but the formalized language of circus still represents a kind of super-human, is this the reason for the sensation of incoherency that sometimes lingers in a circus show, and an unwillingness to communicate these ideals? Am I trying to do butho while maintaining the posture and steps from a tango?

One can of course argue that circus has super-humanness in its core. That this core is the art form itself. Sometimes watching a theatrical narrative with some circus cramped in between the lines makes me believe so. But the opposition between being skill-based and being able to express something (else than super-humanism) artistically seems a little forced. Or at least unnecessary. Even the old myths that revolve around gods with powers far beyond the human tend to address a varied range of human experience.

Lievens continues:

To be able to relate to these wider movements in culture, I think 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.⁸

I wonder sometimes if circus might have lost its immediate connection with society of our time partly because most of us use our bodies less than our earlier ancestors. As a person who works with my body, I am not sure I only see craft when I see an act. Craft is of course part of it. But that also goes for when I am listening to a good concert. If we all used our bodies more, if we danced, worked, explored with them, would Lievens think it was such an over-representation of shows replicating the same stories, the same show off of skill? Would it be easier to read in the nuances of an act? And would a very active child, for example, see something else?

The artist Claude Monet supposedly said “To see we must forget the name of what we are looking at”. Sometimes I suspect specific tricks and physical shapes⁹ being the triggers for

⁸ Lievens, “Open letters to the circus”

⁹ Splits, flags and handstands for example.

creating super human narratives. As if a split or a flag¹⁰ carries heavy enough heroine-symbolism to take the attention from any other theme in the piece. Like how some people use big words in conversation, which makes you forget what they are trying to say while focusing on how smart they sound. The words become bigger than the content. Idiosyncratic.

Unabashed. Abnegation. Triple salto. Beguile.

Another way to approach the question of high skill tricks and creation is to look at how we learn to attack the physical language in the first phase of our artistic lives, the training programs, workshops and schools we go through. (Of course, every teacher and space is different, and here I can only speak from my own experience.¹¹) Most of the training I have gone through have had a heavy focus on tricks and physical ability, the “outside” of the work. Theater, dance, clowning, performance art and sometimes voice work have been part of the programs, but offered in separate lessons. To have some of those tools has been a blessing, but it is interesting to note that the work in the main disciplines are not necessarily integrated in this. Instead the idea seems to be that the techniques will automatically find a way to meet within the artist. When technique and expression is kept apart from the start, it is not so strange if the mending of the two is hard later. Or rather, when the way we train the two is only layered on top of each other, is it that surprising that there is a whole range of artists bringing that layering-technique onto their artistic work and expecting it to work? Would the artistic field look different for circus artists if those classes were kept closer to each other? If the trick was not only a trick even at the very beginning?

¹⁰ Two tricks

¹¹ That is: a two-year period at Cirkusgymnasiet in Gävle, the school Akademiet For Utemmet Kreativitet (AFUK) in Copenhagen, and an exchange at the state circus school in Moscow.

Tom Brand

Now, when you have been reading for a little while I would like to suggest you to put down this thesis, get your headphones and, if you are able to, listen to the sound file with Tom Brand. I spoke to him a spring day in France. Since our ability to focus on one single thing for any length of time is limited, and since the birds are chirping in the background, I have given you this sound file instead of more text. Tom Brand is a circus artist and performer who seems to constantly nerd out on things.

Together with the other people in his company Svalbard he does immersive concerts as well as circus shows. Sometimes, something in-between. In our conversation, we are speaking about the trick, creation and what it means to be close to an audience.¹²

¹² Tom Brand interview in Mothleon, France. March 2020

On the body

If one would try to give you a chance to see how much we change with how we use the body by drawing illustrations of different “circus bodies”, one might realize how difficult that would be sitting by the sketching pad. Both because it would mean finding the essential form of that circus body, and because it is not necessary something that only lies in the shape of the body. It is in how your discipline makes you move. Instead of a drawing, I thought I might describe it to you.

I, for example, walk the slack rope and have long legs, with most of my muscle mass on the thighs. Other slack ropers seem to pick up the same type of hips and thighs. There is also something around the shoulder blades, a straight spine and sometimes a birdlike gaze. Maybe a result of focusing on a single point when everything else is moving.

Maja Nilsson and Tom Brand are both originally trained as rope artists. They have strong shoulders and backs, and tend to have quite thin legs. Not thin like pelicans, but thin and strong. With a torso that seems to be held by muscle in all directions.

What I want to lead you towards is the connection between how we use our bodies and how we develop as people.

Does, for example, my hours of immense focus on microscopic movements of my abdominals (balancing) effect my way of taking in the world? Am I more sensitive for small triggers after all that focusing in one place? And does a base¹³, who use all the time balancing, throwing and catching another person’s body focus more on how people around them move? Are Maja Nilsson and Tom Brand more stubborn people after climbing up that rope so many times?

The connection between the body, our personality and how we take in the world is a whole research project on its own. If you would rather have had the sketches, take some time the

¹³ The person who throws the flyer in an acrobatic duo.

next time you are at a show, a bus, a street and guess peoples main source of physical movement or strength. Look at how they interact with the world. Make some mental sketches.

On bruises

I used to carry my bruises with pride. They meant hard work, sweat, and almost being there. Being close to success. Becoming. More robust, more aware, more competent. Tired, but worked all the way through, worked beaten, with blue and purple proof running down my thighs. They meant I did as much as I could. That this body is not escaping pain. This body can embrace, and embracing my aches I will let me own them. Leaving my face untouched. With my features in order I would let myself lean into it, feel it more or block it out. Holding it all back in my breath.

I used to wonder why no one spoke to me about the different types of pain before. The meaningless, the dangerous and the good. The burns that will tell your skin to harden, the stretching that will bring you further, the tearing of a muscle that will set you back. The bruises that, although they make jeans a difficult matter, let you know that you are not being too soft on yourself. A way to practice self-control. A way to remember that the only thing moving is meat, tissue and bone, bound to the same laws of nature as everything else, a way of keeping both feet set on the ground.

I read a study showing that when we do not know what to do we de-attach our faces. Before fear, confusion, panic hits with full power, our faces go neutral. Saving us from the shame of letting anyone in on what's going on inside of us.¹⁴

¹⁴ Robert B. Cialdini, *Påverkan – teori och praktik* (Malmö: Liber AB, 2005), 130-137

I think about the brown spots on my legs differently now. The need for self-control lies somewhere else, and on my thighs and knees, toes and elbows they are now marks of clumsy, violent, un-used-to instead. Rather than good work – they show the lack of it. They are my body softening.

Becoming less capable, more easy to scratch. I am no longer becoming harder; the marks are mapping out where my hardness is fading away.

In the gym, I am surrounded by men groaning in sweaty agony. Dripping, with their faces curled up in the type of grimace I used to despise. Trying to be so strong it makes them look weak. Leaking their insides out. In their dampness, voices and unprecise postures, I see them pushing their pain away with raising faces. Breathing constrained. Kept inside of their discomfort, more than the discomfort is kept inside of them. As if they were looking for a savior, or at least someone able to give a high five for good effort. I do neither. I just sit down by my machine, slightly awkward over the situation. Both over the crack in their surface, and the lack of a crack in mine. As if I have traded away my codes for this place, unable to perform them again. I just lift my weights with the bruises pressed against the seat. Somehow comforting me with their weakness.

There is a place on the right side of my spine, just above the tailbone, where my nerves just stopped speaking to me. They don't feel anything, or at least nothing gets through. It is quite practical, being the place taking the most strain in my body. Sometimes covered in thin, brown hair. Sometimes just a patch of dark thick skin roughened by the rope.

I show the place to people who somehow happens to touch my back sometimes. Their fingers are a silent humming sensation on it. It is the hardest place on my body. It is the spot I negotiate from. The spot that lets me be rude in traffic. I do give it oil to bring it back to the conscious side though. I am imagining a line of postal service running on train tracks between the spot and the brain. Slow, but still with a possibility for communication.

I go to the gym to see the faces of people groaning again. The lack of control seems to make the space around them bigger. Maybe childish, but also free. Allowing themselves to indulge in the game of acting as if life was really hard for a moment.

In the bathtub, everything floats away from me. There is no longer anything pushing into my skin. The water is carrying me like a breeze. The border between me and what is around me is blurring, allowing me to leak. My face does not change though; it is as still as when I am working. No matter how much warm water I pour over it. In the mirror, only my eyes seem to speak properly. The rest is holding on. Letting no softness from the shoulders down matter.

On the amazing and the failure

One of the gifts of doing circus is the possibility of using the element of the amazing. It is a gift with a cost, constantly being in a state of amazing might keep the spectator in such an amazed state that they are unable to take in anything but that. It is as if the trick becomes so loud that it is difficult to take in anything else a piece might consist of. But let us linger on the effect of the amazing itself for a while, and all the possibilities there is in blowing another person's mind. Because even if there is a distraction in the incredible it is also a door into another person's mind. It is as if it is the hidden door to the trust required for shared excitement and adventures. Showing competence like that seems to induce trust enough in people for them to go into the games you are proposing. It seems to induce credibility enough for an audience to trust you further. It makes children want to be close to you and grownups want to look at you which in turn seems to allow you access to the mind of both. It can also be a way of taking leadership in the situation by showing competence, a way of letting the audience know that you are competent enough to take them through an experience.

In his book *The Social Animal* the psychologist Elliot Aronson describes an experiment he did on competence in relation to liking¹⁵. A group of college students at the University of Minnesota listened to four recordings of what they thought was the candidates for the "college bowl quiz show", and was told that they would have to rate the people in the recordings according to what kind of impression they made and how likable they seemed among other ratings. Each tape consisted of an interview between a man and an interviewer, and the questions were like those generally asked on the "College Bowl", and considered very difficult. The four recordings exhibited different combinations of competence and blunders.

- 1) A person who showed nearly perfect results (92% of his answers were right) and ended the interview without anything specific happening.
- 2) A person with nearly perfect results (92%) but who seemed to accidentally knock over a cup of coffee at the end of the interview.

¹⁵ Elliot Aronson, *The Social Animal*, 11th edition, (Worth Publishers US Inc., 2011) 366-367

- 3) A person with mediocre results (30% right answers) who ended the interview without anything specific happening.
- 4) A person with mediocre results (30% right answers) who did exactly the same blunder as the first (the recording of the coffee-situation was recorded separately and added to both tapes).

The result of the study showed an interesting correlation between being liked, and being *almost* perfect. The person with high competence who spilled out the coffee was rated as the most attractive (2), more than the person who did not do any blunders at all (1). The person who showed mediocre competence without spilling (3), came in third, and the person who had bad results in the interview and knocked over the coffee cup came in last (4). Aronson describes the results as a sign that we do indeed like a competent person, but a blunder in one we perceive as perfect makes them better whereas the blunder underlines the mediocre in the one who showed no excellence beforehand¹⁶. The study was conducted in the United States, and the article on it published in 1966, and since the traits we embrace as a society is a fluid thing there is reason to consider geography and time when looking at this study. In a Scandinavian society choosing to show off excellence might for example not be considered as attractive. But in an art form where the “perfect” execution of a trick is something often strived for, it is still worth noting the power in showing some of the “cracks”.

There is a strategy sometimes used in traditional acts where the performer tries and hesitates or “fail” two attempts of a trick before finally succeeding to everyone’s excitement. Sometimes it is clearly acted, and sometimes it is true (and when it is, a good strategy to keep the audience engaged while not being able to deliver the advertised exhibit of skill). Either way, it is an effective build up to the final, the most spectacular trick. It looks something like this:

After a first failed attempt the artist shows slight frustration, not real anger, but a clear indication that things didn’t go as expected and then tries again. When that doesn’t work, he

¹⁶ Aronsson, *The Social Animal*, p.366-367.

takes help from the audience, making them clap and cheer, and with that energy manages to do the trick excellently.

There are several things in this way of approaching failure and the idea of failure. After a whole number of different moves/tricks the audience are assured that the performer is skilled and professional. Because of that the hesitation or failure is a situation quite like the one in the experiment mentioned above. A small crack allowing us to see the person behind the trick, and letting us empathize with that person. Engaging the audience can also have the effect of further empathy, the audience are no longer passive spectators of extra ordinary skill, they are the fuel making the skill work at all. Thereby they are responsible for the trick as well, and might get a stronger emotional response from it working. A third effect is establishing the actual level. It is hard to know the years of training that goes into adding an extra ball into a juggling routine, or an extra twist in a rotation, but it is easy to know that if a skilled person fails twice at something, it might be a complicated something to manage.

Of course, the strength in this approach builds on being able to choose if and when failure occurs, which requires at least as much control as it would to just do the number nice and clean. As the study mentioned above shows, uncontrolled stumbles tend to push people further away rather than closer. It is as if we have to be able to trust a person's general ability in order to embrace the failure. It is also as if it works just as well done in the opposite order.

I remember sitting in a big room with concrete floors in Copenhagen, looking at a man doing his best to have his breakfast on a slack wire. He is shaking desperately, trying to get the spoon to his mouth before the cornflakes flies of it and on to the ground. The act is funny, goofy, clownesque and charming, people are laughing loudly, twisting in cramps with every bite he tries to take. In the end of the act he simply puts down the bowl, and breaks up in a clean handstand on the wire. We all roar and clap and cheer. Partly because of the trick, it is a big trick, but also out of a kind of surprise. The illusion is gone, but somehow our respect and amazement have doubled. There is a skill in being funny. But choosing funny with all that skill waiting shows something more than funny. A legalization of failure. With the handstand, we know for certain that he was playing all the time. He is good enough to give us pure skill

and gave us fun. Vulnerable play because he wanted to. As in the experiment, the vulnerability and the excellence fed each other, making the funny funnier and the excellence so much more amazing¹⁷.

¹⁷ **ACROBAT**, AUSTRALIA, *smaller – poorer – cheaper*. Seen at KIT international circus festival 2010

In Cille's kitchen

At Cille Lansade's kitchen table we start to speak about creation and circus. It keeps on being quite a trap for me, mending the wants of the trained body with the needs of a story. Or rather, mending my expected wants of the trained body with my wish to explore a story itself. I keep on holding on to the idea of myself as a circus artist, and thereby both wanting and feeling obliged to use the techniques that I have. In every new production, I ask myself "what about the slack rope?" "How does the slack rope fit into this?". Sometimes it ends up making sense in the end, sometimes not.

Lansade, who works as a director and artist in the collective *Anomalie &...*¹⁸ says that she just lets the circus be there. Not trying to make it into something else, but using it as an element, as part of the language. I think about Pina Bausch's pieces, or DV8. Surely, movement is there and doesn't seem to interfere with the story. It is rather the opposite - moving seems crucial to be able to tell the story, it seems to be stories made for the body. Lansade shows me a video, and says that while the technique is not put into something else, or excused, it is not the main focus either, it is part of the language, and used when it suits, when it is the strongest place to tell something from. I do not know where that puts the number, or the high technique – the wish to exhibit high skill. Maybe a piece based on high skill fills another function. It amazes because it is meant to amaze. Maybe the audience does not have to feel connected to every performer they look at.

I read somewhere that Pina Bausch often worked with classically trained dancers, with huge possibilities in their bodies. To make them walk into a room of chairs with their eyes closed, like she does in *Café Müller*, is then a definite choice of how to use technique. As a possibility, not a terminator.¹⁹

To dance must come from something else than technique and routine. Technique is important, but it is only a base. Some things can be said with words, others with movements. And then there are situations

¹⁸ *Compagnie Anomalie&...* Accessed 2 of March 2020
<http://www.compagnie-anomalie.com/fr/accueil>

¹⁹ Lene Thiesen, *Fools 25 – 25 års teater, dans og performance med Københavns Internationale Teater*. (Skive, Handy-Print 2004) 112. Text translated freely from Danish to English by me.

where one doesn't have words, where one is lost and helpless, where one cannot move on. There is where the dance begins, not out of vanity, but of totally different reasons²⁰

Pina Bausch says that she asks her dancers questions, and thereby lets them find their own way through the material. Making it their own answers, and their honest answers.²¹

What happens with our movements when we decide to take them from questions, unresolved thoughts and hungers? Not as a manifestation of these things, but explorations? Can a trained body let its tricks and possibilities out as language when asked? Also when the body is not trained for them being anything else than tricks?

²⁰ Pina Bausch in her speech in when receiving the honors doctorate at the University of Bologna 1999. Printed in *Fools 25*, 112

²¹Thiesen, *Fools 25*, 113-115

I meet a high wire walker who somehow had to stop walking. She laughs after our training saying” But risking your life to be worth anything is so passé anyway”. And it feels as if it comes from a deeper truth. It might still be exiting to look at. But yes, passé, very possibly so.²²

²² Private conversation. Source kept anonymous. March 2020

Another thought in the shower

We keep on refereeing to the trick, or technical circus, but what happens when we start looking into how we define the trick itself. If there is such a thing as movements that are tricks and movements that are not - What would the basic elements be in a “formula” for a good trick?

The illusion of risk could for example be one proposal of a good-trick-ingredient. Or the exhibit of extraordinary skill. An interesting or beautiful shape. An element of surprise or trixterism.

These suggestions could be applied to other art forms than circus, and in them it doesn't seem to stand in the way of their free artistic expression at all.

Lars Von Trier frequently mixes in immaculate, technically advanced images in his film photography, often working as an underlining contrast to the darkness of the stories themselves rather than an obstacle in his story telling. Yoko Ono's Grapefruit is a long list of surprises and twists. Stand-up comedy is often an hour long run of social risk and although defined in various ways.

How come that in the circus these elements seem as if they are somehow in the way? Keeping us from the act of creating, of expressing and being clear. Sometimes when I look at my work I wonder if I let the given shapes, a split for example, be bigger than the piece itself. That I do it because I never asked myself what I am actually into when it comes to circus. What is the “formula” that attracted me in the first place? A split might be a way to get to that formula, but so might another movement. When it feels as if we are re-producing the same material as traditional circus composed years ago, is it out of a fear of letting go of what we know works?

When I as an artist feel that I have to have some kind of physical risk involved in my act, is it a way to avoid the risk of looking stupid? Is it a question of getting over the need of being

cool enough to let go of the things I know works? And letting go of that safety in order to be able to see new ways to get to the point?

The dramaturgy of serving

A durational immersive dinner show for bigger audiences (score)

When the customer steps into the door – look them in the eye, smile. Let them know you see them. That they too are welcome and wanted in a space. If you cannot smile, take time to nod or blink at them. If the person walking in the door might still feel unwelcome, try to close that feeling down like you would with sudden fire. Put a lid on it if it can spread. Cool it off with the social equivalent of a bucket of icy water if needed. A feeling of being uninvited might make the person feel uncomfortable in the space which might spread between the tables. Invest in your customer's ego. Invest in the rest of your day. Remember that the effect of your actions might trickle down for eternity. A nod from you might not only improve your day, but also the day of your customer's wife, neighbor and children, the people they in turn will interact with, and so on and so forth.

If you are not fast, be precise. Meet a customer whose food is late the way you meet hungry children. Speak slowly. Speak clearly. Let them know that their order is coming, and that someone in the kitchen remembers that they are there. Again. Never let a customer feel as if they are not in your mind. All of the customers must always feel as if they, and their presence is of the uttermost importance to you.

If you smell trouble, be dangerously funny. Give them a motherly tease. Even if you are *imagining* them as children in order to handle their hungry sulking, don't let them *behave* like children. Remember that you are the host, and thus

the leader of their experience as well as responsible for everyone having a good time simultaneously. If one starts crying everyone will start crying.

If you can affect their choice of menu, try to get them all the way around the taste circle. Something salt something sour something sweet something bitter. Take their hand and lead them through oral balance. Don't let them get oversaturated in one taste. A customer might know what they want, but be quite confused on what makes them happy.

Always say yes if they ask for more bread. The bread is, just like your warm laughter, an investment in your future. Give it to them as if it was something special, for them. It will make the bread taste better if they think that they got away with something special. Besides it will keep them from asking again. No one wants to go from being special to being pushy. It just does not feel nice.

When finally giving them the food, make sure to draw their attention to something that will excite them about it. If the food is good to moderately good make them speak about the food while they eat it. There is nothing as wasteful as a good meal composition destroyed by a conversation about a sad day at the stock market. If the food is bad, draw the attention to another sensory experience, the salt from Himalaya or the beautifully grained wooden table they are dining at. Or simply smile again. Charge them with the positive energy they need to swallow something that's not worth tasting.

Either way leave them with their experience for a while. If you are lucky they will be in the right mind to take in the sensory experience you have put in

front of them. A bit hungry, relaxed, trustful, knowing that you care for them, that you still have them in mind.

Anytime a new customer comes in, smile and nod to them. Let them know that you see them.

As soon as they have finished eating – take the plates. Do not lead them to think about the end of the meal, a small death of this moment. Always nod when you ask if they want coffee. Everyone wants coffee, no one wants to think about it too long. Everything must operate smoothly from the serving of the meal, since every clumsy timing might remind them that this moment also has a timeline. As everything, this is just a moment, and it is tied to an end like the rest of us.

Before giving them the bill, ask them about their experience. If it was not terrible, social norms will make them say they liked it. Give them the chance to define their experience that way before you give them the bill. It will increase both your tip and their satisfaction.

When they leave, say goodbye to them. Have all the time in the world. Smile again. Make them remember that you see them. You have just had a fully immersive experience together. You have had a moment that will never come back again. Wait until they turned their backs on you before you turn your back towards them. When smiling at a new customer remember that they are here for the first time. Smile to them, see them. Make sure that they know that they are welcome.

What marketing psychology has to do with it all

I think it is time for us to step into the vast field of our wants, needs and strategies, following the path of social psychology, marketing psychology and the devil in seeing a human as a bundle of questions.

There was a time when mass psychology was often on my mind. Mass psychology in politics, in consumption, in how it affects us in our daily life. I was fascinated by how easy a jog becomes when running in a group, and how an idea's survival seemed to be tied to how high social status the person who came up with it had. I was reading Mikhail Bulgakov's *the Master and Margarita*, where the devil goes about his deeds not as much by luring the individual into traps as by simply letting them walk there by themselves, and then, by shining the light in the corners reveal human behavior in its weakest form. The pain of it all is often emphasized by scenes of mass hysteria, or mass reactions of other kinds, and the deeds seemed so forgivably human. Researching Bulgakov's themes further I discovered Edward Bernays, also called the father of public-relations, a master of fiddling with the mind of bigger groups. Edward Bernays was a nephew to Sigmund Freud, and according to the BBC documentary *The Century of the Self*²³ he came home from a stay at his uncle's with groundbreaking concepts of the self, and ideas about how much we do in order to keep the idea of our own selves intact. Understanding how much of our understanding of others we take from the symbols they carry is the way advertisement works, and his work is still what we build modern advertising campaigns on. We will not go in to it fully here, but there are some key concepts I've continued to return to.²⁴

One of the big ideas Edward Bernays came home with was the idea of one consistent personality, and how we communicate that personality to other people by symbols. Some of them are obvious now, like the clothes we wear, or the things we own. Some less obvious, like the way we speak, or move. In short, the genius in Edward Bernays' understanding of the self was that he was one of the first to insert capitalism into it. In a time where you bought what

²³ *The Century of the self*. 17 March 2002. [documentary] BBC 4.

²⁴ *Century of the self*. 2002

you needed only because you needed it Bernays understood that if we think that we can buy a symbol that shows us and the world that who we are (or whatever we wish to be) we will.

During the same period I took a course called *Marketing psychology and the art of persuasion* at Lund University. The teacher promised to revolutionize our lives with a heavy southern Swedish accent and then started the first revolutionary fire by clicking us through a dusty slideshow. It was the same year as the border controls between Sweden and Denmark were installed and I felt as if I had made a short-term contract with the devil. Showing my papers by the gate and then allowed into a new way of seeing the human mind as a collection of buttons to push or not push at your own choice.

I was surprised to find quite a few co-relations with things I had heard clown teachers and street artists mention in passing. In after thought - I guess it makes sense. Pulling the emotional strings of people to give them experience from a stage might have some crossovers with a field pulling the emotional strings of people to make them consume. We are after all one specie, and we do have some shared internal triggers that create valuable information for anyone wanting to make more than one person feel something. A strategy that has stayed with me is the 6 rules of persuasion, developed and written down in his book *Influence: science and practice* by Robert B. Cialdini, a professor in psychology at Arizona State University, USA. I'd like to give you a brief introduction so that you have an overview in your back pocket later on.

These theories are based on a view of the human as an animal that, just like other animals, have built in responses that can be triggered under the right circumstances. Since the human mind is constantly dealing with input we have to divide the world into categories, as well as our responses. One could say that we have two possible tracks to take when presented with new information, or when we have to take a decision. One is the reflected, where we take time and energy, way the pros and cons and consider possible outcomes. If we don't have that time and energy on the other hand, we tend to take more impulsive decisions, and this is where these triggers and responses tend to come into play. It is a bit of a simplistic way of explaining it, some of these responses are in play in other states than purely stress, when we

are in love for example, when we think someone else is in control, or when we are in risk of losing social status. Rather than stress, they key might be moments when we do not know exactly why we took the decision we did, but moments of stress would be a good example. You could imagine yourself in the store, after a full day of work or training and trying to get a meal together for the evening. Odds are that you will have more fast carbs, more bright colors and some more candy in your basket, than if you would have gone there rested and full with a list the day you are off. Both baskets are collected by you personally, reflecting decisions you took yourself. But the choices you made might be closer or further away from what you in your conscious mind was set on.

Cialdini's principals goes as follows.

Reciprocity

Giving and being given to

A strong glue in groups is the idea of reciprocity, the notion that everything you give comes back later, may it be in the same form or another. It is the mechanism that makes it possible for us to share freely with a group, without risking to lose everything we have. One could see it as a type of insurance.

Imagine a group of people growing their own food. If everyone keeps the food from their crop to themselves there will be periods where they have a lot of food, and periods where they have none. If they share on the other hand, they will as a group have access to a lot more varied crop, making it possible to eat from one person's food when the others have nothing, and then again from the others when the first has run out. The process of sharing triggers feelings of community and belonging.

The rule of reciprocity does of course rely on somewhat equal sharing. If one person feels that the exchange is unjust they might keep their resources for them self, which breaks of the whole circle. That makes our sensitivity for that specific balance big, and we can go quite far to avoid unbalanced relationships. We are so concerned about the equality of the sharing that being given something often creates a feeling of being obliged until we have given back,

which in turn can lead to us taking some choices that we would never have done if we were not engaged in the situation of exchange in the first place. A small example is the tasting of different flavors before buying a cone at the ice-cream place. When we are given a spoon of ice-cream we are much less likely to walk away without buying anything than before tasting it, even if the ice-cream might be awful. Interestingly, the action we took in order to not have to eat something we don't enjoy (tasting before we buy) might lead us to do exactly that (buying because we felt obliged). Since the giver is the one who has already offered, it is also the giver who will determine what is given in return. And regarding too that it is interesting to note that a person who never let us give back creates as much tension and dislike in us as a person who takes, but never gives back.²⁵

Another aspect of reciprocity is that we see a reliving of pressure as a type of giving. If you are negotiating a price and the other party gives a little, you are likely to feel inclined to give a little too. If someone takes a first step to break the awkward silence in a room you are likely to follow up by filling some silence yourself.²⁶ When the tense moments in a play is broken by a moment to laugh, or a scene of beauty, is part of the warmth and gratefulness we feel towards the actor provoking the change inducing the game of reciprocity?

Commitment / Consistency

Who we think we are and what we decide to be.

In his book *The Social Animal* the psychologist Elliot Aronson describes the human mind, and how important it is for us to have a coherent idea of who we are.²⁷ As flock animals it is important for the group to be able to recognize the individual's behavior, and thus for the individual to have a set of traits and behaviors that are coherent from day to day. If Ida loves cat's and has a big charismatic personality one day, we expect her to be somewhat charismatic the next. If she (without any obvious reason) would have started hating cats and developed a shy and insecure way of interacting overnight, it might make us a bit worried. In some cases, this leads us to correct our behavior in correlation to the *idea* of how we are, rather than to

²⁵Cialdini, *Påverkan*, 32–62.

²⁶Cialdini, *Påverkan*, 51–56.

²⁷ Aronsson, *The Social Animal*, 50-70.

what we feel in the moment. If you for example would have put your name on a list against pollution in city areas, you are more likely to give money to a person calling to collect money for Greenpeace a few weeks afterwards. This is because of the alteration you did of your self-image when you put your name on the list. Your name there means that you care about nature. Thus – giving to a group working for the preservation of nature is the only logical behavior when they call.²⁸

The same thing goes for commitment, a person who says that they will do something and do not go through with it is often considered incoherent, which can lead to social repercussions. No one likes a person who cannot be trusted, not even if that person is ourselves, and it is something we avoid being even if it is. In relationship to performances it is often used when the tickets are free. If you go through the trouble of booking a ticket, you might as well go, because you have already said you're coming, contrary to a performance where tickets are free and you can show up by the door.²⁹

Another interesting effect of this mechanism is that it seems to be in play when we are making up our minds about ourselves. Some studies show that if we do something without obvious reasons, we internalize the reasons for our choices, and conclude that we did what we did because we wanted to.³⁰ When a street performer asks you to warm up by clapping your hands it might make you more comfortable clapping, but chances are that it makes you think the piece is better as well. Thinking back, you remember clapping, and why would you clap so much if you did not like it?

Social proof

Doing what other people do.

When we are trying to take a decision and in doubt, we often look for external hints about the right behavior. What others do, one could resonate, must be done for a reason. And while we do not know why, we are still inclined to do what a lot of other people are doing. That is why it might be smart to let people queue more than necessarily in a long, visible line outside of a

²⁸ Cialdini, *Påverkan*. s.75–83

²⁹ Cialdini, *Påverkan*, 67–112.

³⁰ Cialdini, *Påverkan*, 83–89.

club, the reason cafés without guests tend to stay that way and street performers work so hard to get the first person to stop and watch their show.

It is also worth noting that one person's history, the social proof of a singular individual is often more trusted than statistics, which might be one of the reasons people who are friends have similar cars. A place in culture and entertainment where social proof is used to such a high extent that it might be right about driving us all crazy is through canned laughter in TV-shows. Annoying or not, science shows that we laugh both more and more often when a TV-show uses canned laughter.³¹ And - when we laugh the rule of consistency kicks in, it makes us think that we think that the show is actually that funny.

There are also other, less sympathetic functions of the rule of social proof, such as the “by-stander-effect”. When we are stressed and uncertain what to do (it could be if someone starts a fight in the tram, is too drunk, is having a heart attack or being harassed on the street), we tend to try to keep our faces neutral while trying to get cues about the situation by looking at the faces of everyone else. This can create a situation where no one does anything since we all look neutral, as if nothing special is going on. When Maja Nilsson is speaking about explaining what is normal to a potential audience, it is a way to cure the “by-stander-effect”. Defining the situation loudly let's people know, and keeps them from nervously rushing on, trying to stay cool about it.

Authority

Deciding who we follow.

Who do we trust? People in suits and uniforms are often used as example. Even if we know that the person dressed as a dentist in a toothpaste advertisement is likely an actor, the uniform itself often makes us more inclined to take their word for it. The same goes for people in nice cars (who we see as better drivers) and people who exhibit high social status.

³¹ Cialdini, *Påverkan*, 117–129.

One of the most famous experiments on authority is Milgram's experiment on how much pain one person was willing to put another person through when being told to do so by an authority. When the subject was presented with a cause and a reason, and did not have to face the person they were torturing, they seemed to be able to cause the other person quite a lot of pain, so much that it in a real life situation could have been lethal.³² When asked why afterwards, some of them stated things like, "I was just doing my part"³³, showing that some of the effect of authority might have to do with responsibility.³⁴ When following orders the moral responsibility is perceived to lie on the person giving the orders, rather than the one executing them.

In terms of stage art, it might be worth giving the authority we have as performers a thought. When we take a volunteer, we are obviously the one in power, but we are also in a position of power in front of an audience. What does it mean in how we are perceived? What is vulnerability when in a suit vs. in a tracksuit? What is expedition of power? Is there a way to momentarily lift away the built-in authority of a performer, and is there a point in doing so?

Liking

Tips from friends.

There is a book written in the 1930s with the title *How to win friends and influencing people*, which has sold 15 million copies.³⁵ The title says it all. The book discusses who we like, who we invite in to our minds and hearts, and thereby also into our decisions and world views. Who we decide to like has to do with a range of things. Their perceived attractiveness³⁶ is one thing, as well as how similar they are to us. We are also taking in to consideration how familiar they are, to what extent we have worked and interacted with them previously. We like

³² Read a full description of the experiment here: Saul McLoyd, "The milligram Shock Experiment", *Simple Psychology*, 2017, accessed February 21 2020

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/milgram.html>

³³ "People still willing to torture", *BBC News*, December 19 2008, accessed February 21 2020

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7791278.stm>

³⁴ Cialdini, *Påverkan*, 197–220.

³⁵ "How to win friends and influence people" Wikipedia, Wikipedia, Accessed April 1 2020

³⁶ Do note the word *perceived* here. In the studies leading to this information the scientist would let a number of people rate the subjects in the study in terms of attractiveness and drawn results in relation to those studies. Beauty is still, as always a pretty relevant thing, where time and place play a role to. Cialdini, *Påverkan*, 167-184.

competent people. And people who like us. We like people and situations we have invested in. It could be time, work or money or the pure fact that something has had a cost for us. It makes us value it higher, which is one of the reasons violent initiation rites to fraternities and sororities³⁷ shows to be so persistent. If they were not so hard to get through, not many people would like to be part of them.³⁸ It might also be what is in play when Maja Nilsson says that the more the audience does for you, the more likely they are to pay for the show from a stage perspective. Liking is a principal often already at play. When showing our tricks, we perform competence, as well as when we invite the audience to a well performed show. We might flirt, making them like us because we like them. We might use values of beautiful and ugly to push and pull the audience closer and further away again.

Scarcity

Saying yes while you are still able to.

Scarcity is what makes us want what we cannot get. It is what keeps us loving gold, buying limited editions, stocking up on things like toilet paper in a pandemic and feeling as if the last cookie in the jar is the most precious of them all. It is also the mechanism that makes us want to do what we are not supposed to, the charm in forbidden love, the lure of political ideas mostly looked down upon. Research shows that when something is censored it is often regarded as more true, or relevant than it was before it was banned.³⁹ As a performer, this could mean that there is potentially reason to work with small audiences, individualized experiences and hidden messages, and thereby giving everyone a better or more profound experience just by creating a feeling of it being “an exclusive experience”.

Edward Barneys and Robert B. Cialdini’s thinking is of course angled towards the spreading of products and ideas rather than creating emotional experiences, which is reflected in the rules they put up, their definitions of mechanisms and the way they have angled their information. By tapping into the human organisms most basic behaviors and mechanisms they reveal something that is more universal than pushing shopping. To look at these principals,

³⁷ Social organisations at schools and universities.

³⁸ Cialdini, *Påverkan*, 167–184

³⁹ Cialdini, *Påverkan*, 235–239

and look further than I have had the chance to take you here, is to look at how we perceive and interact with the world as a whole. The rule of authority is a way for us to be able to take fast decisions about who is the leader of the pack. Reciprocity is a way to survive as a group. As a performer and producer of stage art, I can look around and see some of these principals in play already. Take the way art that is considered very difficult to understand keeps on being both wanted and regarded as profound. One could see it as the rule of scarcity playing out. Or the glass of wine at a premiere. It is nice. But does it also make us like what we see a bit more?

Maja Nilsson

Maja Nilsson is a street artist and an aerialist. She grew up in Sweden, studied at Cirkusgymnasiet in Gävle, Akademiet For Utemmed Kreativitet in Copenhagen and Dans och Cirkushögskolan in Stockholm. She is based in Hawaii, spends half of the year in Scandinavia and has worked as a street artist in Europe the last ten years. The text you are about to read is an edited version of an interview we did over a scratchy, cross Atlantic skype connection in March 2020, a sunny morning in Hawaii and a rainy evening in Gothenburg. If you want to listen the full interview find the attachment called Maja Nilsson. It is in Swedish. She has a lot of interesting things to say that did not make it to these papers.

Maja Nilsson – On street shows

I was in Copenhagen that summer, this must have been 12 or 13 years ago, and at that point Copenhagen was a very good city for street shows. There was artist from all over the world. That way of performing really appealed to me, it was a very direct conversation or interaction with the audience. I also had a back injury that made me slide away from circus slowly, and the street became a way of continuing to perform. You are very human on the street. In another way than you are on stage. They see you for who *you* are. You can use a character but, more than they would on a stage, the audience want to see who you are, because you are so close. There is an intimacy that is difficult to get on a lot of stages.

There is no audience there when you start. You have to start by convincing people that you have something worth looking at. Something I did not think about when I started is how much of a skill there is in being a street artist. It is not so much of your technical knowledge, your juggling or acrobatics for example. It is about attracting an audience. How do you keep an audience? That is a skill you have to learn, and I had not reflected so much on that before doing street shows.

There are some templates for street shows you can follow, that many artists have used and that work. I think the basic idea is to create an interest. A curiosity among the audience. A lot of artist use sound, often music, but it can be other sounds, whistles for example to attract an audience and stand out from the crowd. You are still an artist. Because you perform. You might not dress like an artist, but as a totally normal person. That can create an interest

to “what is that suit doing putting up a slack rope on the street?”. A musician often looks like themselves, like anyone but they stand out because they have an instrument or a microphone. You can have traditional circus clothes too. But I think one does stand out automatically because you are doing something no one else would do on the street.

They need to understand that it is okay to look at you, that you are professional. You are not mentally... You are not a person who wants negative attention, there is a plan, this is your job, you are here to perform. It's a relationship to the audience and a trust that goes both ways. I think it is about calmness. There are many artists who comment on the situation in the beginning of a show. They say things like “I bet I look like a crazy person standing here in the middle of the street speaking without an audience. But trust me, in the end of the show I will have a full crowd” to the first people there. There is often a lot of explaining in a street show. It is difficult to get the first people to stop, no one want to be the first one there. The audience doesn't know. “Will this be worth watching? Will I be the only person standing here?” You explain to the first person there that they are important. That the more people who are there, the easier it will get for the next ones to stop.

I think that all the things you tell the audience, that you haven't had conversation all the time makes it pretty intimate. You know each other, you momentarily build up a relationship, almost a type of friendship.

You're having this process together, and they have in a way made an agreement with you. When they say “Okay, I am standing here and I will stay” they are in a way saying “Okay, this is an agreement. By staying I have

committed.” They can leave of course. But if they decide to stay they have given you quite a lot of trust.

You might not take the most difficult tricks you have, there is something else that is more exciting on the street, that thing of getting to know the artist so close up. People compare it with how it is to do stand up. You speak about yourself, you give a lot of yourself to the audience. I think that the fascination, and the beauty of it is how personal it is and that you as an audience can feel it.

I can bring what I have learned about audience interaction on the street with me on a stage. I think it has given me a strength that I would not have had without the experience of being a street artist. It is quite cool, that you can take that closeness to the audience with you. You are a human. More than just an artist. If we would take the example of being a circus artist, on the street you are not only a circus artist. It might be even more valid when it comes to circus since circus artist does so amazing things, things very few people can do, but how do you relate to that? As an audience? One can think “Wow that is fantastic”, but sometimes it is on such a high level that it almost doesn’t feel human. But when you have seen that there is a human behind the costume and the trick then it really becomes something. Then you can feel everything that went into it. All the time, the training, the mental journey that level craves. When you don’t just show your trick, but give the audience a part of yourself I think it makes your tricks much more amazing.

The closeness is what is the most difficult part of working on the street as well, that it is so personal, that you cannot hide behind a character or stage

light. It is difficult to avoid opening up for the audience. You are there. And they really see you. If you had a fight with your boyfriend right before you are going to do a show, that will be with you. It is very difficult to not be affected by that. In a way, I think I have to go into a character on the street. It is a part of me, but it is the Maja that dares to stand in front of people. Who dares to say “Hi, I am going to do something now. And I think that you will like it, I think that you should take half an hour out of your day and look.” You have to be able to access that part of yourself. You don't always feel like opening up to people.

I do think that it is that risk that always attracted me to the street. The emotional risk you take when you go out there. On stage to, but I think it is easier to... I think that if you want it you can hide a bit more on stage.

Your first audience members are often your most important. They are often the people you bring up on stage later, because they have already said “We will give you this trust”.

They will be brave. It takes some courage as an audience member to be one of the first one to say “Okay, I will take the risk, I will give you a chance and I have no idea what you are going to do”. So, they are often very good audience members. Many artists use what you normally call 'anchors'. You can give someone who is watching a prop, a juggling torch for example, if you give them that they become an “anchor”, they are holding something and can thereby not leave. You can place anchors around you in a circle, so that you have 3-4 people who cannot leave, you secure a small group. In some way, they know that if they take the torch they indirectly agree to play along.

It ends with you asking the audience to give you money. That is how we get paid on the street. And that is a big thing. It is one thing to ask people to watch and something totally different to say, “Okay, now you have watched, I hope that it was worth money”.

Many artists say that the thing of having them do things for you before the end helps. When you build your audience you often mark out a circle or half circle on the street that marks out your stage, and then you ask them to come up to that line. That’s the first time they say yes. That is a commitment. There is always a few in the back that leaves, and that’s fine, it is better that they leave then than in the middle of the show, and the people who are still there have said yes. It is the first time they do something for you, and with them you make kind of an agreement. After that you often get the audience to clap, cheer and root for you. When you are doing your last trick they often count to three together. They do all of that because they want to, not because they have to, and it makes it more likely that they want to pay you. That is also something they do for you even if they do not have to.

It is a bit like the thing waiters do when they nod while they ask, “Do you want more coffee?”. It is in a way the same thing to be positive all the time, to say “that is wonderful!”. You might not give people a chance to say no when taking them from the audience for example. You don’t ask them if they feel like it, you say “I need help!” You often ask them two questions they want to say yes to. “What’s your name? Ah, Anders?” (the first yes)” where are you from? Oh, really, Sweden?” (second yes) “Anders, would you like to help me?” When you get to the third question you have already taken them on a specific

path. That is also kind of a format. Then you can put what you want into that standard.

I think that this conversation with the audience makes it into a game. By stopping and watching the audience has already said that they want to be part of the game, “I want to be in a dialogue with you”. When you are an audience member on the street you are active, it’s not like sitting down and watching a film or theatre show. It can, of course, be scary having to interact so much as an audience, but I think that having the chance of being engaged is what makes it so fun.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ This is excerpts of an interview with Maja Nilsson done in the beginning of March 2020. It is edited for readability and shortened but otherwise Maja Nilsson own words.

The mirroring neuron

Another way to understand connection and empathy is by looking at the mirror neuron - a small part of your brain that reacts equally on what you see others do and what you do yourself. Although quite discussed it is described by some as the physical place for feelings, empathy and our ability to connect with others.^{41 42}

From a practical standpoint, mirror neuron is not as much of a compact piece of brain as one might first imagine, but is instead connected to several areas of the brain. It reaches from the premotor cortex, the supplementary motor area, the primary somatosensory cortex, and the inferior parietal cortex⁴³. It has a strong connection to the visual cortex and the emotional center in *gyrus cinguli*, *insula* and the *amygdala*.⁴⁴

From that position the mirroring neuron reacts to the world in a quite inclusive matter. It lets us experience what happens to other people similarly to how we experience what we do or feel our selves, allowing us to foresee actions of the other, understanding what the other person is doing and feeling similar things as the object of our attention. It has the capability to react to both visual and motoric stimulation. When you see someone else do or feel something reaction in you is as strong as if you had done that same thing yourself.⁴⁵

All that practical information can feel a bit dry. The full depth of us walking around with a part of us that do not know the difference between us and the other in our head all day dawned on me while going through old podcasts a few weeks ago. In the episode *Entanglement by Invisibilia*⁴⁶ a woman describes the condition *mirror touch synesthesia*, and

⁴¹ Joachim Bauer Varför jag känner som du känner. Intuitiv kommunikation och hemligheten med spegelneuronerna (Natur och Kultur, Stockholm), 15–16

⁴² Hanna Rosin, Alix Spiegel, Invisibilia, *Entanglement*, January 29, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510307/invisibilia?t=1581523418844>

⁴³ Wikipedia, s. v. "Mirror Neuron" accessed January 12, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirror_neuron

⁴⁴ Rolf Nilzén, "Teorin om spegelneuronen förklarar förmågan till empati", *läkartidningen* nr 32 2008, online edition accessed February 20, 2020 <https://lakartidningen.se/aktuellt/kultur-2/2008/08/teorin-om-spegelneuron-forklarar-formagan-till-empati/>

⁴⁵ Simone Wanderoy Blemings "Empati och effekten av ett dysfunktionellt spegelneuronsystem" (essay, Uppsala universitet 2015) accessed online February 20, 2020 <http://files.webb.uu.se/uploader/858/BIOKand-15-031-Wanderoy-Simone-uppsats.pdf>

⁴⁶ Hanna Rosin, Alix Spiegel, Invisibilia, *Entanglement*.

how she, as a person diagnosed with it, cannot stop feeling what she perceives as the feeling of another.

She describes dinners where she can feel her own mouth full of what the person in front of her is eating. How she is suddenly lying on the floor in a shopping mall, unable to help the child that really fell in front of her. Following strangers on the street because they seem happy. Having a boyfriend in a coma and spending hours and hours looking at him, experiencing the silence of someone who is not feeling at all.⁴⁷

Normally there is another part of our brain that regulates the sense of self, keeping us from the other. In individuals with mirror touch synesthesia it is often very small.⁴⁸ Still, even if that part of our brain is in full function, most of us have a strong reaction to the feelings of others. Mimicking the same facial expressions as a speaker when concentrated, laughing more when we hear others laugh, holding our head when someone else walks in to a door post. Somehow making us connected on a deeper level than what our daily life let's on.

I heard somewhere that culture is a way of us to practice feelings in our own life. That we by seeing Kate Winslet let go of Leonardo DiCaprio in the waves of Titanic are experiencing a rehearsal, a small and safe version of our own lost loves, and practice for the lost loves to come. That watching an acrobat try and succeed at a difficult trick gives our brain practice in thinking that success is possible.

The idea of the mirror neuron as the source of all human empathy is being looked over at the moment, and there is not any evidence that it is the only place from where we create the understanding of others.⁴⁹ But it is still worth noting that somewhere inside of us, there is not a sharp distinction or difference between internal and external. And through evolution it is still there. A little place that sparks for us all.

⁴⁷ Hanna Rosin, Alix Spiegel, *Invisibilia*, *Entanglement*.

⁴⁸ Hanna Rosin, Alix Spiegel, *Invisibilia*, *Entanglement*.

⁴⁹ Christian Jarret, "A calm look at the most hyped concept in neuroscience", *Wired*, December 13, 2013, accessed February 21, 2020 <https://www.wired.com/2013/12/a-calm-look-at-the-most-hyped-concept-in-neuroscience-mirror-neurons/>

On what might happen between the words

A fascination that never seems to go away is the one for the words in between the words. Or rather, the un-worded. Introduced first to the written language, (my mother was an enthusiastic storyteller and writing teacher at my childhood desk), I spent some of my teenage years half successfully trying to capture it in poetry, then I found it in in circus and started to move, then in physical theatre, books again, in clowns, in specific ways of verbalizing the world, revealing eyes, in turned heads and shrugged shoulders, in love, in nature, in music.

When watching other people move, there is something that differs some people's movements from others. Maybe it is the directions they take in their limbs, creating stretched lines and exciting dynamics between their legs and arms, maybe how much space they manage to create inside of their joints, maybe something entirely different. It seems to come with time. For some, another possibility is that it is an effect of the heightened sensitivity hours of training can enable. Throughout the different training spaces I've been in I have not yet found what it is. Other people see it too, though. It is something visible and discussable, although without a specific word for it.

Sometimes I think that it lies in the non-coded, the undetectable, the movements that we cannot foresee. When I watch someone, and my mind cannot tell me anything about what will happen next, I have to trust them, and if I want to find out, I will follow them where ever they go.

There is a game used in warm-ups for clowning that builds on the non-foreseeable, and breaking your own patterns.⁵⁰ I say a word, "golf" for example, and you say another word that cannot under any circumstances be connected to mine. In this example, you could say "horse" or "biochemistry" but "club" "grass" or "cart" is forbidden. So is "industrial work" or "sweat", since they could be seen as opposites and that too is a type of connection. It is more difficult than one would think at first glance. We are to a large extent programmed to build

⁵⁰ *Clowning and cultural aid*, Vårdingeby folkhögskola, 2007.

upon the known, the done, on patterns and consistency. Doing the same thing with the body is as difficult. And watching a person having a “non-connection” between the leg and the shoulder has a type of hypnotism on its own. It is as if the unpredictability of the move works on our gaze like magnets, wanting to decode what is going on.

Watching magic can have a similar effect. When you do not know the mechanics of the trick it can be hypnotic, but when you have learned where the handkerchief goes, it is just a piece of fabric hidden, not worth much of your bewilderment. It can still be fascinating, but from a technical perspective, an intellectual grasp of skill.

Is it curiosity of the other person’s mind and physicality that makes us want to watch each other? Because otherwise, why would we not always be more preoccupied with ourselves? We are, after all, the one we like to speak about the most according to several books on effective communication out there.⁵¹ It is in our own body the sensation is strongest. It is through our own nerves we engage with the world with the most intensity. Still, we look at each other on the street, see shows by and about each other, we sit still in our chairs to watch another person move in front of us.

A similar phenomenon to the fascination of some people moving is what we often call “being able to hold the room”. It’s a specific way of capturing attention, to create enough energy around one’s own body to draw everyone else’s eyes to you. It can be done from a general social setting and from a stage. For a moment, you are the leader of the pack, people breath with your breath, their heartbeats are adapted to yours, they listen to your voice and follow your movements. They tone into you. Is there a connection between the flock instinct and our wish to see a performance? Is good showmanship connected to dominant behavior?

The trickster character shows up somewhere in here as well. Or the outcast. Being “of other” draws attention. As if that in itself is enough to hypnotize. Maybe because being “of other” means belonging to other rules, or no rules at all. A freedom of unpredictability. Someone

⁵¹ *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie for example.

impossible not to follow with the eye because no one knows what comes next. If its fear or amusement is difficult to know.

Getting back to the words, whatever they are not saying seems to be what captures me the most. As in a constant set of Ingmar Bergman's, I go through the day listening as much to people's breaths, looks and silences as to their sentences. I feel as if the most exciting moves in human interaction are done by the small muscles. The ones we hardly see, but that trigger us by the gut.

Gaps.

I am sitting straight up in a red velvet chair. My friends coat has a fur collar; I took liquorice with me in a bag. We are almost grown-ups and it is difficult to know if the intensity radiates from between our shoulders, or the stage in front of us.

There is a woman with a big mouth singing. Her lips are stretched wide open, the dark red is pulled from the curve of her mouth up to her cheeks. There is a wire walker who falls, then gets up and succeeds without changing as much as an eyebrow. A man balancing red balls on his white head, someone in a boxing ring, dust in the lights, a woman doing endless walkovers in a corner.

I find a child class in gymnastics that will take me in, despite my combined age and absence of skill. I also stop writing. Not because I don't enjoy it. But because it seems like such an inefficient mean of communication. In the moment, I can't explain why. Later, I see the lack of that explanation as a proof of the insufficiency itself. In the moment, I just do things. I send applications, find workshops and practice a terrible cartwheel. I try to get a grip of where my arms start and end. Attracted to the heat like a mosquito.

*

On a balcony in Jutland, a farm cat has walked up my left leg and formed a perfect circle on top of my crotch. There is a lake and a swan and you don't roll your cigarettes, you take them straight from the package into your mouth and a small flame of fire.

I've meet an elderly woman at the kiosk. She asks me to pass her a carton of milk, thanks me and then explains how the end is finally near. The vibrations are getting deeper and stronger and she has seen it coming. Now the shaking is reaching, unheard, intensity and it is time. Then she throws the lid of her coffee cup into the recycling bin, smiles to a barking dog and leaves with a nod to the cashier.

I am hired as the extra excitement. In a short, red suit I circle around an excavator in scene four, before the driver lowers the shovel for me to tie a rope to its head. Then there is Spanish music, and I dance on the rope in symbolism painted so thick that it is dripping.

I wonder how I have missed the words for the gaps and the unspoken meanings, and with a slight frustration, how you managed to hold on to yours. Can you keep something without a name close to you with pure willpower? Have I been drifting away through push-ups, cartwheels, and rigid patterns of movement? In front of your mirror I wonder if I have been practicing the wrong language all along.

There is space between your words, symbols in your movements, your looks. In my thoughts, you have suddenly always been there. I dream about you drinking from a pond I thought was my own. You dive in, you are fully emerged in it, soaking wet. Unlike me, you drink, you cook and wash and swim until it is sucked into every part of your being. You are a fish, and I have a cup in my hand. I am thirsty, but I do not move. I just squint my eyes to see if the water will blend with the sky while I am not looking.

In reality we go swimming and I watch you jump in with soggy boxers. I am already wet. Panting, and freezing in the water I have jumped without thinking, and my soaking t-shirt sticks to the body, heavy.

There is only one mirror in the house, by the shower in the basement. I go there in the mornings, after a few hours in my own bed. Brushing my teeth, I see my own face, and how it seems different. Wilder. Calmer. Easier to recognize. I think it's the sun, the lack of a brush, the need of a haircut, the woods. I feel as if it is the nights, the talks, the cigarettes, the moments where all gaps are filled. With foam around my lips I lean back into the world which seems to be shaking softly.

Trying to keep some kind of dignity, or maybe control over the situation, I act as if there is no difference between my now and before. I get a haircut. I do not mention that you are the first one who answered the gaps for years. Instead I speak about the body. I claim to have kept it there, the gaps and the places without words. It is a lie. But my body around you is as close as I get. I make a list of everything that is undoubtable, and collectively true. It includes posts about death, breath and the need of eating. It secludes the words communication, reality, and being. When I touch you, I hope you can hear the water ripple at least a bit in my veins.

On top of it all the stars never seem to stop falling. I read about it in the paper later. It is September, and apparently mainly a result of what they call the meteor season. It just an act of nature. It was expected since years.

*

“Read between the lines. Then meet me in the silence if you can”

- May Sarton

Scribbled in the bathroom of the city library, it stands as an act of microscopic rebellion. I take a photo, send it to a friend with a smug comment on how badass looks for an academic, then made it the screen picture on my phone. Then I write it on the first page on my notebook, and then I fall in love, mainly because of the way he says things without saying them, acknowledging the in-betweens as stated truths. Later I will mainly see this as an elaborate take on passive aggression, but until that happens I feel as if the other me is looking back at me through layers of coincidence and luck. Calmly lighting a cigarette, like a popstar from the nineties, waiting for me to look up and cop on.

The piece

In December, close to our end presentation, with my mind full of thoughts I needed something to try it all out on. I had previously done a performance lecture on the mirroring neuron, and following the trace of the body I found so much information on how we blend with our environment that I decided to base the work on that. In hindsight, it might have been better to only circulate around the rope. Or at least clearer for myself and the experiment.

Now, instead, there was two layers simultaneously, both pointing towards community and connection, but in absolutely opposite ways. A good or bad decision, if you would have been there, it might have felt something like this (and for clarity what I was trying out when, do read the footnotes, it is all hidden there):

There are not very many tickets⁵² to the show, and you have to book them in advance, by writing and email with the date, your name and your favorite love song. You get a personal answer. If you do not send in a song, you get a personal reminder.⁵³

You arrive, and are called up one by one, and get a ticket that is hand made. There is a person there, giving them to you. She seems nice.⁵⁴

You are let into a room all together. There is elevator music, salty sticks and grapes. Light is soft, but still bright. There are also notes everywhere, telling you what you can do, what you cannot do, and giving you inspiration if time is to slow and awkward for you. Nothing else happens for ten more minutes. You wander around. Maybe you mingle with someone you know. Maybe you study other people who know each other mingle.⁵⁵

⁵²Scarcity. Making them open by making them feel as they got hold of something very special.

⁵³Liking through investment. The tickets are free, but the extra work of sending songs and emotional content is an investment too.

⁵⁴No one wants to feel tricked. If they have invested energy to something, or felt as if they managed to get something scarce, do not make them feel like fools.

⁵⁵Experiment on the lack of comfort, and the release of the uncomfortable. How will it be for people to be forced into a space where they seem to be supposed to mingle, and then waiting there with nothing to do? Can I trigger the rule of reciprocity by reliving them from the frustrations of the situation?

After a while the elevator music fades and a voiceover starts. It is a female voice. *“What is there in the meeting? Really? What makes us look up when some people walk into the room, to engage, take interest in, take notice of, talk up, open up to, pull out chairs for, get coffees with, what makes us stick out our hands in belly height in hope to reach the velvet touch of another human being? What does it mean to say ‘I’d like to know you better’?”*⁵⁶

You see a face outside the window looking in. She opens the window from the outside, it only opens in a small crack and she starts to press herself in through it. She is wearing low heels and a tight suit, the type with a skirt and a jacket, her hair is up, and she is carrying a bundle of rope over her shoulders.⁵⁷ It seems to be attached to a rope that has been lying in the room all the time. between her huffs and puffs (the crack is really very small) she starts speaking, it’s the same voice as the recorded one. She says: *Of course, any research on life or quotes, would it be on in bar-conversation or your own Instagram account, can bring you to that point of “we are all born alone and we will all die alone”, but there are several things that seems to be forgotten in that rather careless statement.*

Finally getting out of the window she starts handing out the rope. Nodding to all of you, as if she has been waiting for you to show up.⁵⁸ She says: *The beginning of our existence for example. Yes, after spending our first months entangled deeply with our mother’s bodies, we are spat out from the womb into cold air. But until it is cut, we are still physically connected to the umbilical cord as if born with an umbrella of blood, nutrition and caring. Besides that, psychologically we wouldn’t know the difference anyway. Our self and our survival are so tied up in our mother’s bodies that we continue to believe that they and us are the same entity for a full year. Our own psychology saves us from the notion of infantile solitude.*

You might, or might not take the rope at once. You see her, and other people seeing her speak. She says that she is happy that you came, makes sure that you all hold on to the rope,

⁵⁶ First introduction to the theme – blending through sharing space.

⁵⁷ Will they be more open if surprised? I had just read the Monet quote “To truly see what we are looking at we need to forget its name” before taking this decision.

⁵⁸ Creating personal relationships. Trick from cafe’.

and give you some practical instructions. She does also inform you about your independence, saying, *I would like you to know, or remember, that anything you do here will be done by free will. I will not force anyone to anything. There will be no punishment, and you can leave at any time. As in every other moment of your existence, your life is yours and for now you stand here because you yourself at a point took the decision to.*⁵⁹

Then she asks you to close the eyes. And open them. And close them. And open them. Then she asks you to lie down on your stomach. Then she says she is just kidding and then all of you follow the rope your holding out of the space.⁶⁰

You open a door into a courtyard and stand in front of three big windows. She stands in front of you, now looking pretty cold, and in order to see you have to stand kind of close. Pulling out a pen from her pocket, the same type of pen your old high school teachers must have had, she starts making notes on the windows while bringing up the eternal questions of solitude and closeness.

She says: *The thought of our pre-birthal experience does spark a whole range of questions. Does for example the term “alone” refer to feeling alone (this goes up on the window), or being alone, and either way, can you ever say that you are or are not alone at all? Even if you don’t see anyone for a week, you are surrounded and infested by microscopic individuals, bacteria, ants, parasites (they all go up on the window as well), the walls around you and the floor below you are crawling with creatures. And still, no one will ever fully be in your head.*

All of you are touching the rope on the way from one place to the next. The woman walks into a small room with glass walls. She uses a code to get in. you can see and hear her, but except for a big plant, she is in there alone. It looks a bit like a dried-out aquarium. She circles around the plant while speaking. You don’t really know if she is flirting with you or the plant. She says, *It might be true that no one can be fully in your head, but truth is, that you are not fully there yourself. Or rather - the you you perceive as you is not fully you whoever is there.*

⁵⁹ Forcing people triggers pushback. Luring them into doing something they perceive as their own will makes people internalize the behavior and make it their own.

⁶⁰ Addressing the power-relationship we are in as well as giving them a light nudge trying to say, ‘you can do what you want, but you won’t’.

Less than half of your body mass would be carrying your own DNA, the rest is bacteria, fungus, parasites, ... others.

Then she stops, a little too close to the plant and looks straight at you. *Now, we could linger in thoughts on life of a parasite, a tic for example, or that brain fungus that makes humans and rats like cats - They do not only seek the company of another, they are unable to live at all if not attached to the bloodstream of the chosen one.* She reaches out for the plant and quickly moves into a tango grip, burying her face into the plant. If you didn't know it was a plant, you'd say they were kissing. Now you just don't know. She lets go of the plant again. *In comparison, oh Romeo - your love is lukewarm.* Here she runs up to the glass and sucks it, as if wanting to give it a hickey. You can see the inside of her lips, and a little of her teeth. Then she opens the door.⁶¹ *All of this is just a way of reaching the point, the meeting itself.* She starts pacing the floor in front of you, suddenly close. *When walking through a space, we shed cells,* she takes off her jacket, and drops it on the floor. *And we sweat! Leaving the space around us littered with what we used to be.* She keeps on taking off layer after layer, a frilly shirt, the skirt. *Everything we touch, will forever have a little trace of us. Of the fat on our skins, some cells, the bacteria we carry.* She lets her hands slide on the walls *You can try it!* Maybe you do. Maybe instead you do like the guy in front of you, just let the rope slide between your fingers and walk on, hoping he didn't touch anything nasty before he went in. the rope leads you in to a small dark room, the air is terrible, it is warm and its crowded. While taking off her socks, the only remaining piece of clothing except a slip dress and a pair of boxer underwear, she says *Just being here, in the same couple of square meters we have in fact already started to consume each other. Sweat drop by sweat drop, breath by breath, cell by cell. You might be shy, but you cannot stop your body from hungrily merging with what we've decided to call the other.*⁶²

Then she turns around and bright light hit you as you walk onto a stage.⁶³ There is a slack rope, and she jumps up towards it, as if to play, and slides down on top of the rope, lying on her back. There is music, as if played from a dusty record, as she moves along the rope,

⁶¹ If I create a strict character and then let her fall apart, will that create an easier access to feeling an attachment to her?

⁶² can you feel closer to the artist by feeling closer to the people around you as a group?

⁶³ Can you feel closer by having the same sensations as her, having the same stage-light hitting both of your faces?

rolling, balancing, stretching, looking at you sometimes, at someone else or the rope at others.⁶⁴ Then she gets you all to carry her down, and your elbow or something else might touch your neighbors.⁶⁵ You might be lifting one of her feet, or a strain of her hair. Then she leaves, speaking about how we are all new, replaced cell by cell, within 7 years. And then you are there alone.⁶⁶ There are some tulips still attached to the leek standing in piles of dirt on the floor. The same voiceover as before sings “flesh and blood needs flesh and blood”, it sounds as if she was alone when she recorded it. It is a bit out of tune. Maybe she just sings that poorly⁶⁷. As the light goes down you see a sign still lit. It says:

I am glad that you came. I am in the first room. If you want to join me for a snack or a chat, meet me there.

Maybe you go there, maybe you don't. If you do, the room is almost unchanged, except the woman has changed into a pair of dungarees, and act as if she has now stopped acting. There is a jar of sprouts and a cell phone too, if you lift the lid its playing love songs, mainly from the 80ies. Beside it there is a sign saying *Jonas, Jacob Mira, Maja and their friends have grown up listening to your favorite love songs. Thank you!*⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Can you invite people to your game with a gaze?

⁶⁵ Touching is supposed to induce a sensation of belonging and thereby happiness in people. Happiness is supposed to give people more mental space. Would this mean that giving people an excuse for light touch can make them more open for the material presented for them on stage?

⁶⁶ giving people time alone, to think, have a moment where they are a group without a leader.

⁶⁷ showing “cracks”, of non-perfection after exhibiting competence

⁶⁸ If they invest their energy into doing something for you, don't let them feel like fools by acting as if they did it in vain. Act as if it was important.

Afterwards

After the shows were over, after everyone went home and the sprouts were eaten I kept on coming back to asking myself how much of my work is just plain flirting. Building things up, tearing them down and smiling with a sense of getting away with it. Spreading some ideas, which, to be fair, can be part of flirting too.

I had divided the piece into three, a pre-performance (the booking, love song and email), a main performance (the piece) and a post-performance (the “talk to the real person Moa” afterwards). The email correspondence was used to make people feel seen and special by starting an individual conversation with each one of them. By making them work to get a ticket, even if the work was of a playful kind, I hoped to trigger the rule of liking by investment, and by having a limited resource of tickets trigger their want to come through by the rule of scarcity (the later might have worked, the seats filled up twice).

Letting people wait for an uncomfortably long time was a way to make my own appearance a release. A type of “good cop/bad cop” in shape of social anxiety. Triggering the rule of reciprocity by taking them out of an awkward situation, and making sure that they were ready for me to show up. And then, social nodding to everyone, as if they were all my personal guest. A way of making people feel as if we were one, and a first attempt to become a more accessible person.

When I was finally on stage it became quite important to underline the freedom they had in order to create a room where people felt free. And by feeling free, having a bit of a more open window to open up for the things I was speaking about. On a side note I also wanted to address the question of authority in a performance situation. Both because I was hoping to create a feeling of equality, but also because I think it is important. If I could make them wonder why they all did what I told them to, could I make them see me as more of an equal participant and human being?

Together with the costume department I had decided to have a tight-fitting pencil skirt and a strict looking jacket with it. As it was taken off, piece by piece in front of the audience I was wondering if it was possible to connect the authority of the cloths to the person inside of them. Would people see it as a “crack of the surface”, or just fluently change my status and character in their minds? I used to have a teacher who said that you get paid what you look like, meaning that if you want to get properly paid for your work, make sure you invest in your costume. In this piece, I wanted to see how it worked to change as part of the show. Would the clothes still affect one’s status if it would seem to be an artistic choice rather than a question of production budget? And did it seem to be that way?

Another thing that happened during the weeks before the performance was that I started to look for “play” instead of “skill” when being on the slack rope. I had been so fed up with my own training for such a long time that I felt like it was way past time to change something. And play was part of the reasons I started. It used to make me so excited. Now I had to go back and ask myself basic questions.

What does play look like for me?

What sensations did I like enough to continue when I first tried the rope?

What is fun?

Can I do this in a way that activates the sensation of having fun with movement as the main drive again?

It was two weeks before the show, and after spending the last one and a half years reading and writing more than moving I felt out of shape, out of balance and out of hunger. Fear of failure might have been part of it. Or knowing that this was supposed to be the culmination of a period I went into looking for substance but ended up finding something else, something I could hardly formulate. I could have written a thesis only about finding play again. And about finding grounding as an artist, and letting yourself let go. In times of doubt I mostly go back to training. In times of doubt I hold on to my splits and balances like a child clings to its favorite blanket. To old routines, to things that “works”. But spending two years and ending up with a version of an act I did five years ago seemed cheap. Much cheaper than necessary.

To shake myself out of habit I had ordered a thicker rope than I was used to, and since it vibrated in another rhythm it kept me away from my most standard routine. It was soft and white and leaning into it I was embraced rather than bruised, and I could walk on it barefoot, without any protection for the feet.

Being able to touch the rope with the skin on my feet triggered something different. Maybe it was as simple as getting a new sensation while using a technique I had been in for ten years, but I suddenly felt something open. A new way of moving, a new way of sensing a softness that allowed me to explore.

It was only a few days between the rope arriving and the first show. But it was as if something woke up again. A way of understanding by sensing. A way of finding by trying. A way of playing by letting go.

It did make me remember something I forgot years ago. The power of enjoying something has its own built-in amazement. It is a trick in itself. Something to tickle with. A way to invite people in.

How I make you love me on stage⁶⁹

A love letter and a breakdown of an act through Cialdini's principals of liking.⁷⁰

Dear audience.

Let's pretend that I can see you, fully, inside out and outside in. Let's pretend that my fantasy is your truth for a minute, that your mind is rolling through my hands the way a child's mass of slime might, fluent, shiny and speckled with sparks of glitter.

You might think your fascination with me comes naturally, as an act of free will. Well some of it might. But I think it is time for us both to acknowledge that the free will at many times is a want under influence. And I do work a lot to make you feel the fascination you do. An act with me is an act of performed seduction. Now, I enjoy it, don't get me wrong, as I lure you closer to the image I present to you, I take pleasure in your attention and affection. But as in any affair, there is a time for dropping the mask, and as you look, remember one thing. I am not the only one who skillfully seduced you in shiny tights. You seduced me too. With your clapping and cheering, making me want just one thing. Your laughter. Your eyes, your shocked smile. Your breath when letting go of yourself. While you loved me with all of your childish honesty, I loved you with all the ideas I can put in your head.

⁶⁹ Inspired by rope artist Karoline Aamås and her *stating piece*, where she tells us what is on her mind while doing her act. Performed among other places at Fun Fatal Female Circus festival 2015.

⁷⁰ Robert B. Cialdini, *Påverkan – teori och praktik* (Malmö: Liber AB, 2005), the whole book.

As I walk in, slowly, I let the light reveal me a tiny inch more every second, pulling your eyes closer. Letting you see me, as you would in a bar, seeing a set of high heels or a beautify shaped back. I look you straight in all of your eyes at once, in the moment of entering, that is just how big I am. I see you. All. Clearly. By glittering a bit in the eye, I let you know that am here to play. Invite you. I stretch out my arm, kind of like God when Michelangelo paints him, and go for the slack rope, pulling it down towards my chest in one smooth motion⁷¹. Then – casually showing off my vital power, I pull myself up, go around it, toes pointed, even before I am balancing I am proving my competence to you.⁷² I sneakily place the rope in a safe spot between my buttocks, clearing any chance for an unsuspected wobble, while still keeping a classy appearance for you to enjoy. Then without further hesitation, I stand in one straight line, arms down without as much as a wobble, letting you know that you are safe with me. I am balancing on the edge of risk, I am driving in a fast car with no seatbelt, but we will not crash. With me, life is exiting exciting, but I've got it, you don't have to worry about a thing baby.⁷³ I take a step, then go straight into a balance on the back side of my toes, move towards a pose showing of my toned legs⁷⁴ and strong toes, then surprise you all by a quick move to the side, letting you know that I am not foreseeable and boring, I also have surprise and fun, and you will never know where you have me, I can throw you of your seat in any moment. Then, calming you with a slow split, I bring you back in again. Surprising or not, I am still in control of the situation, and I will bring us through the whole way.⁷⁵ Then I take a moment. In a place of extreme stretch, I look you in the eyes again. I ask you,

⁷¹ Exhibiting signs of high status.

⁷² Exhibiting Competence.

⁷³ I don't know about this one. A bar trick? It is definitely a trick. Maybe a twist on the well know trick of showing competence?

⁷⁴ Exhibiting beauty without pushing it, acting "unaware" of its existence but yet letting you see it.

⁷⁵ Exhibiting authority through competence.

through one clear look, are you with me? Do you feel this? This is the moment I let you into my zone. To the place I really care about. I take you through my own twists and turns, having you in my hand now, I can open the door I let you come with me to the fun and the sensitive parts. Right in-between two of my more impressive segments (a series of twists and a split followed by a back roll a shoulder stand and a smooth bendy backwards bow past the pelvis and back to the bum), I place a quirky little hang, beautifully shaped but still goofy looking, showing my human side but without completely losing control⁷⁶. You might wonder “why take such a choice in that smooth routine she put together?”. But then – maybe smiling to your self- “Well, we are all human, how charming she is, showing herself from more sides than her most polished”. This is where I might really get you around my finger, when you think that you saw me, that you caught me, a teaspoon of vulnerability to make you of guard, and for the next few tricks, you are as open as can be.

When you look at me now you might see a human, a representation of us all, your neighbor, daughter yourself in the mirror. And if you clap, it is no longer me you are clapping for. When we finish, and the sweaty remains of what just happened still hang in the air, we both know that this is something different. Something can never go back to what it was. Because clapping is now for humanity, for yourself, for the joy of feeling like you met someone and that you can still see and be seen. You might think it is me you are throwing your warmth at, your roses, your love, your cheering, but you are no longer clapping for me. You are celebrating the success of my seduction. The power of love and the opening you just found in yourself. Me you let go of a long time ago.

⁷⁶ Exhibiting signs of competence, combined with human failure.

The end

While in the middle of writing this thesis, I met a woman on a train who was developing a new app. All techy and savvy and excited about her project she gave me something of a speed-pitch, telling me everything about the person she imagined it for. Their problems, their salaries, their identities, their class, their families. As if they were old friends, or as if she would at least have met them, knew their kids, their email habits, and seemed to have been in their living rooms. Later into the conversation I learned that she was just very into her target group analysis. Imagining those living rooms or not, the motor of her project seemed to run on understanding the needs and dynamics of the receiver, to such a high extent that the product almost came across as secondary.

If a thesis was a series on Netflix, with a next episode right at your fingers, these pages would have been followed by some about how we see the people we are making material for. If one would choose to do a target group analysis as an artist, what would happen to the material? And is there a chance that we, by not doing so, hold on to ideas about our audience that might not be true? Would work done with market psychology and a target group analyze be more connected to society as it is? Or would it be so driven by hitting a sweet spot in the receiver that it would inhibit the work from being as profound as possible?

If a thesis was performed like a show on the other hand, this is where I would thank you for coming. I would give you a chance to clap for the people involved, I would tell you that the bar is still open, and that we take whatever practical payment method. By keeping the foyer open and the lights down I would hope that you lingered in my world for a bit. That the small talk on your way home would allow you to live a bit longer in the world I proposed, and maybe, if you would like it to, thereby make it yours for a while.

If a thesis was planted like a garden, we would have reached the point where the tea would be finished. We would be leaning back in our wooden chairs and having a look at all the shapes and colors our seeds had turned into. We might be close to June, lingering right between seasons. In one way at the last days of spring, and in another the first days of summer.

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