

## **The Political Body in New Circus and Contemporary Circus Arts: Embodied Protest, Materiality, and Active Spectatorship.**

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### **Abstract**

Contemporary circus artists Philippe Petit and Philippe Ménard have created compelling works that have combined circus with performance art; in particular, Petit's *Twin Towers High Wire Walk* (1974), and Ménard's *P.P.P.* or *Position Parallèle au Plancher* (2005). These works now stand as limit-text works in their relative fields, which is to say they are works that go beyond the previously accepted limits and now point to new boundaries, or new questions, as to the reaches of the field. This paper asks whether notions underlying performance art can provide a tool to aid in deciphering meanings in these powerful limit-text circus works. It investigates the origins of one of the understandings of the body of the performer that is fundamental to much of performance art—that is the idea of the political body and embodied protest. The notion of materiality is also discussed in relation to the use of ice in Menard's P.P.P.

Active, engaged spectatorship is another important aspect of performance art in decoding the body-in-space and its political and poetic import. Although readings by active spectators may sometimes exceed the performer's expressed intentions, these diverse readings form an important component of the work's ability to resonate on multiple levels. The works by Petit and Ménard are explored in relation to these ideas of the political body and embodied protest, materiality, and active, engaged spectatorship.

### **Background**

“The year 1968 was a global insurrection” (Watts 1).

In May 1968, students were protesting everywhere from Paris to Berkley, from Mexico City to Berlin, Rome and Bangkok. French cultural theorist, Pascal Jacob, pinpoints New Circus as arising out of this unrest, “Circus underwent a transformation in Spring 1968, and faced a public rejection of its codes” (11). Julia Kristeva, a philosopher and East European exile who arrived in France in 1966, described the mood in Paris in 1968. She remarked “one word on everyone’s lips in May ’68 was ‘contestation.’ Contestation expresses a fundamental version of freedom: not freedom to change or to succeed, but freedom to revolt, to call things into question” (12).

At around this time, circus, having undergone a period in the doldrums with the rise of television and cinema, suddenly started to attract fresh interest. In 1956, the Moscow State Circus—a state-funded circus which combined traditional circus skills and Russian gymnastics—toured Europe for the first time, revealing a new form of circus developed behind the Iron Curtain. Artists from different fields, including radical theatre, performance art, and dance, started to see new possibilities in circus. Jon Hawkes, originally a performer in radical theatre and one of the founders of Circus Oz, writes that he was attracted to circus partly because he was frustrated by the small audiences that radical theatre drew in and wanted to move into a form of performance that was both popular and had the power to attract crowds. Traditional non-Russian modern circus, however, seemed old-fashioned and almost feudal, as circus skills were kept within the family and not taught to outsiders. So he and his collaborators founded the New Circus company, Circus Oz (Hawkes).

In New Circus the conventions of traditional modern circus were contested. Non-human performers (lions, tigers, elephants, and even, for the most part, horses) were all banished. The circus ring and the figure of the Ringmaster were largely rejected,



Students protesting in front of the Faculty of Letters, Rome, 1968.

Photo: *Wikimedia*, public domain.

and traditional clowns were abandoned as *passé*. In response to this move away from all the iconic imagery and content which had defined modern circus, where nearly everything which had come to represent traditional circus had been rejected, Pascal Jacobs, in a report compiled for the European Federation of Circus Schools, asks, “What is the sense of a circus? Does circus still exist?” (12).

As animals had been banished from its performances, the attention in new circus was focused onto the human body. Circus scholar, Peta Tait, grappling with the question of what exactly defines new circus, writes, “the crucial element of circus, [is] its bodies and their different physicalities” (130). Jane Mullett, a co-founder of Circus Oz, concurs, writing that, “circus is defined by the bodies that perform it” (36).

New circus began to hybridise with other art forms, including contemporary dance, and radical theatre. Some of the more experimental New Circus works hybridised with performance art, another discipline in which the human body is central. In this paper I consider the origins and resonances of some of the thinking in performance art and investigate whether these ideas can help to decipher meanings in some of these hybrid circus/performance art works. The work of Philippe Petit and Philippe Ménard is explored in relation to these ideas.

### **Embodied Protest**

When thinking about the body of the performer in performance art, one central idea is that the body of the performer, with no text, script, or theatrical props, and in a much reduced, but carefully considered context, is believed capable of holding encoded political, social and personal meanings and can function as a site of embodied protest. Investigating the origins of this idea of embodied protest, which is found in much performance art, Isaac Souweine traces one lineage to the Doukhobors and Leslie Hill traces another to the Suffragettes.

Souweine points to the Doukhobors—a group of Russian, Christian, pacifist anarchists—as the originators of embodied protest. In 1890’s Russia, they protested against conscription by the Czar by burning their weapons. Then, in 1899, nearly 8,000

Doukhobors fled violent reprisals by emigrating from Russia to Canada. In Canada, they began calling themselves Svobodniki, or Sons of Freedom. They soon began to protest again – this time against the Canadian government’s refusal to allow them to legally own land communally. “By 1903, the Sons of Freedom had added nakedness to their repertoire, seeking through nakedness to walk with the simplicity and moral purity of Jesus... For the next fifty years, public nakedness remained a central aspect of their proselytisation and dissent” (Souweine 526).

Souweine draws a lineage of embodied political protest from the Doukhobors, through to Mahatma Gandhi. Although Gandhi wrote extensively, it was his embodied protest that was his most effective tool in his political campaigns:

From 1893 when he refused to accept apartheid seating on a train in South Africa [...] the essence of both Gandhi’s writing and his political allegiances are expressed in his bodily acts of political dissent [...] Gandhi melded the political and the personal so completely that by the 1940s his hunger strikes effectively pitted his moral and religious potency against the very fate of his nation’s history. (532)

Souweine goes on to trace this effective use of embodied protest from Gandhi to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose civil rights activism was built around organised key acts creating potent images of civil disobedience and embodied protest. In 1956 Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to surrender her seat to a white person, and in 1960 a sit-in was held by black students at the whites-only restaurant of their local Woolworth’s store in Greenboro, North Carolina. These images of embodied protest spread the message of civil rights to the world. The violent suppression of the Paris protests in 1968, pushed large-scale acts of civil disobedience out of the street, and protestors turned to the body as an individual’s



key way of manifesting political, ethical and philosophical protest (532). This physical embodiment of ‘political personalism’ (532) with the body as a site of protest was a key idea in the development of performance art. The body began to be seen as being invested with the power to be read as a statement of personal protest, as a political body.

Leslie Hill, on the other hand, argues that the origins of embodied protest can be traced to the Suffragettes. She writes, “Edwardian ladies [pioneered] a new hybrid art form in which the personal was political, the political was performative and the performance was public” (150). Many examples of political performance can be found in the suffrage movement, including Mrs. Drummond’s megaphone address from the cabin roof of a river launch to members of the Commons on their terrace tea-break, Mary Richardson’s slashing of the Velasquez *Rokeby Venus* in the National Gallery as a protest against the imprisonment of Emmeline Pankhurst, and their hunger strikes in prison. Hill proposes that it was this cross-fertilisation of politics, theatre and philosophy in the actions of the Suffragettes that gave rise to many of the ideas in contemporary performance art.

In both these lineages, the Doukhobors, as proposed by Souweine, and the Suffragettes, as suggested by Hill, the influence of the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau can be traced, specifically his writing on civil disobedience. The Doukhobors flight from Russia to Canada was partially funded by Tolstoy, who himself had an extensive correspondence with Thoreau, and Lady Constance Lytton, a suffragette, when imprisoned in 1910, inscribed a quotation from Thoreau on the wall of her cell (Harrison 39). Thoreau’s profoundly influential text, *Civil Disobedience: Resistance to Civil Government*, had been published in 1849. Thoreau, motivated by his abhorrence of slavery and his intense disapproval



Doukhobors marching nude in Langham, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1903. Photo: *Wikimedia*, public domain.



Mahatma Gandhi spinning, late 1920s. Photo: *Wikimedia*, public domain. (left) Emmeline Pankhurst being arrested at King's Gate, May, 1914. Photo: *Wikimedia*, public domain. (right).

of the Mexican-American War, proposed in it that individuals should never allow their personal conscience to be overruled by government and that laws which cause injustice to be perpetrated should not be obeyed. The influence of this essay *Civil Disobedience* was widespread. “The list of people influenced by this writing is astonishing. It famously includes Tolstoy, Gandhi and Martin Luther King” (Cain 153). Staughton Lynd writes, “What was central for Thoreau was neither violence nor civil disobedience but direct ac-

tion: the absolute demand that one practice -- right now, all alone if necessary -- what one preaches” (qtd. Cain 65). These lineages of embodied protest brought several key ideas with them into performance art. These were the conviction that the personal is political, the belief in the importance and the power of live presence, the notion that political truth can be embodied, and an emphasis on performing personal truths rather than ‘acting’ (Hill 1).

### **The Role of the Spectator and the Location of Meaning**

Another crucial element that performance art has embedded within it is the emphasis on the actively engaged spectator in gleaning multiple allegorical meanings from the body of the performer. Joseph Beuys’ work encourages spectators to engage actively and decipher or ‘glean’ meaning from the work. Beuys was a passionate admirer of James Joyce and actually included a copy of *Finnegan’s Wake* in one of his installations, and carefully annotated editions of Joyce’s work were found in his library after his death (Hayes 35). It could be argued that it is the same kind of active engagement required in reading Joyce, with its highly referential, poetic, allusive layering of meanings, that is also required as part of the engaged spectator’s involvement with Beuys’ performance and installation, and in so much other performance art.

Beuys is a key figure in the discussion about the meaning of performance art and installation, and whether meaning is located in the performer’s expressed and conscious intentions, or whether it is located in the way the piece is deciphered by the engaged spectator. Jonathan Jones, art critic and judge for the 2011 Turner Prize in London, writes, “Beuys was very articulate, almost too articulate about the meanings of his performances.” Beuys, Jones argues, presented his work as concerned with democratic politics, optimism, and New Age ideas, but in fact Beuys’ work resonates



with multiple layers of meaning, many of which are far darker. Jones writes, "Because Beuys is a German artist, it is impossible not to see the wounds of history everywhere, with a surpassing melancholy that dwarfs his attempts to commit his sculpture to an optimistic democratic politics. Beuys hoped his lumps of fat spoke of fluidity and progressive change. In fact, they are blocks of rancid yellow memory -- fat from Germany." Jones goes on to argue that it is the darker political resonances about German culture and its recent history that Beuys did not himself identify, that add depth and complexity to his work. It is these darker layers of meaning that Jones intuits which in fact lead him to point to Beuys as the greatest German artist of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Jones writes, "We can mine Beuys for meanings we need because there is such a generous excess of content."

### **Philippe Petit and Philippe M nard**

Returning to circus, both Petit and M nard have created limit-text works in their own fields. In the work of Philippe Petit, it could be argued that the traditional circus skill of high-wire walking and performance art came together to create an astonishing limit-text work in his *Twin Towers High Wire Walk* in New York in 1974. There is a long history of spectacular high-wire walks including high-wire walkers in ancient Greece, who were known as *neurobats*, through to Madame Saqui in the early nineteenth century who walked between the towers of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, and on to Blondin with his breath-taking walks across the Niagara Falls (Demoriane). On 7 August 1974, Philippe Petit walked across a cable between the tops of the two tallest buildings in the world at that time, the Twin Towers of The World Trade Center. He performed for 45 minutes with no harness, buffeted by the wind and shouted at by police and security guards. Documentary photos of

the event taken by his friend and associate Blondeau, show that Petit is not wearing a special costume, he is wearing his street clothes. He is not performing as a fictional character in a fictional world. All theatrical pretence or pretext has been stripped away. He does not have any fancy props; all he has are the tools of the trade, the bare minimum that he needs to do the walk. The power of this performance resides in his live presence. He is not acting; he is performing personal truths.

It is the intersection of performance art with circus that requires the spectator to actively engage with the image of Petit's body in space and the context he has placed it in, and to read it for meaning, searching for political and poetic resonances, even if they exceed the artist's expressed and conscious intent. Approaching the images of Petit's Twin Towers walk with these ideas in mind, the documentary photographs become invested with the fragility of life: that is both the fragility of Petit's own life and a poetic intensity that underscores the precarious nature of all human life, not only as individuals, but also as a species. With our current knowledge of the 9/11 attacks, and the resultant destruction of the World Trade Center, these images become even more potent as they point to an ephemerality of both the performer's body itself and of the two highest buildings in the world and by extension potentially Western culture itself.

His high-wire walk has been memorably documented in the film *Man on Wire* (2008), directed by the English Director, James Marsh. The award-winning Irish writer, Colum McCann, also explores the image of Petit's wire walk in his 2009 novel, *Let the Great World Spin*. McCann's description of Petit's wire walk is five pages long and is a thrilling piece of writing. It shows how Petit's walk is effectively embedded in the contemporary psyche. The work can be deciphered as presenting a political body that res-

onates on many levels. It is a life-changing, limit-text work of new circus.

Philippe Ménard is a juggler who originally studied with the highly respected master juggler, Jérôme Thomas. One of Ménard's most powerful works is *Transformation P.P.P.* (which stands for *Position Parallèle au Plancher*, or "Parallel Position to the Floor"). This solo performance is an investigation of juggling and also a limit-text work contesting the limits and boundaries of the art of juggling. Ménard juggles with balls of ice that freeze his hands so he can't move them, and as the balls of ice melt, and change size, they slip and become uncatchable.

In this work Ménard investigates the materiality, the physical presence, and the poetic resonances of ice. This investigation into the actual substance of ice itself throughout this performance opposes the theatrical convention of substituting one object for another, in which, for example, tea is often used to represent whisky on stage and the actor merely acts out a response to drinking whisky while in fact drinking tea. The exploration of the materiality of an object underlies much performance art, the idea being to ground the experience in the physical body of the spectator through the use of actual substances that are familiar. For example, in *How to Explain Paintings to a Dead Hare* (1965), Beuys anointed his head with honey and gold. Some of the associations that the spectator could bring to seeing honey in an installation or performance are described by Beuys, "in mythology honey was regarded as a spiritual substance and bees were godly" (qtd. Tisdall 44). In the catalogue introduction for his show, *Joseph Beuys, Process 1971-1985*, at the Rooster Gallery in New York, Beuys is quoted as saying, "I want to get to the origin of matter, to the thought behind it" (qtd. Rooney n/p, n/d).

This interest in the allegorical or metaphorical resonances

of a material has, through the contact between performance art and circus, informed some of the most memorable new circus works. The materiality in Ménard's work repays in-depth readings. In *PPP* Ménard juggles with ice. Thomas Ferrand describes how difficult the process of learning to juggle with ice was for Ménard, "Ice is a hostile material... The ball of ice breaks, slides, crashes and burns the skin. It cannot be controlled... Philippe Ménard tells us that total control is an illusion and that the material tames us" (8). Stine Degerbol describes how, as the ice changes into water, Philippe Ménard explores the dynamics of transformation. As the ice melts and changes shape it points to a metaphorical reading underscoring the notion of the transformation of the traditional art of juggling from tradition to renewal (Degerbol 8). The transformation of the material also reflects the performer's own personal journey, through a process of sex change operations, from being a man into being a woman. Ferrand writes, "Philippe Ménard reveals himself to a disconcerting degree... He suggests several times that his sex change is [...] a voyage from one state to another, just like ice changes from a solid state to a liquid one" (8). Degerbol writes that, "By using ice, the artist brings a natural element onto the stage, an element that is both powerful and fragile -- just like her and just like life. I am left with a feeling of restlessness and uncertainty brought on by my thoughts about identity and existence" (8). This work of Menard's can be seen as presenting a political body of embodied protest. This sense of impermanence and flux in relation to the body and the emphasis on the body in process with an ability to affect and be affected by its environment, is potentially highly politically charged, as the notions of permeability and process, both in body and identity, challenge the concept of a fixed and stable identity on which societal control is based.

This paper has traced the origins of embodied protest within

performance art, explored the notion of materiality and the importance of the active and engaged spectator in deciphering allusive layers of meaning, which, even though they may often exceed the expressed intention of the performer, offer diverse resonances that have the potential to increase the potency of the work. These ideas, when brought to bear on hybrid circus/performance art, can potentially offer a wealth of meanings to mine and reveal the political body in New Circus and contemporary circus arts.

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