Bodies, Temporality and Spatiality in Australian Contemporary Circus

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

February 2018
Abstract

Informed and impelled by my professional experience as a circus artist, this dissertation maps the practice features and cultural influence of contemporary circus in Australia, investigating its development and situating it in relation to alternative circus practice internationally. I undertake a conceptual discussion of the development of Australian contemporary circus and of its current features. This involves the discussion of the milieu it created and continues to create for itself, the “middle...from which it grows and which it overspills” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987); its many lines of flight as sub-genres, styles, companies, training and sustainability; and its ability to renew and extend itself through continual processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.

I explore the growth of the artform; its artistic processes; how spatiality has shaped contemporary circus, including the part played by certain ‘circus cities’ in industry development, and the relationships between performance venues and artistic processes; the national profile of contemporary circus and its major contribution to Australia’s international performing arts output. Simultaneously, I consider the performance of the contemporary circus body in space and time. I am interested in the diversity, multiplicities and “creative chaos” deployed by independent artists and major companies in the production of work, along with the nature and significance of embodiment, risk and trust in performance. This involves, for example, the influence of Chinese classical circus techniques in the training of Australian circus artists, as well as the impacts of feminist and queer ideologies and bodies on the practices of circus and the aesthetics of performance.

Methodologically, the thesis is grounded in approaches and opportunities consequent upon the lived experience of an insider researcher who has participated in the industry as an aerial performer, artistic director, company manager, trainer and colleague. The case studies of key companies, practices and sites of practice are therefore based in interviews with a cross-section of practitioners and other industry personnel who recognised the value of the research. Similarly, the project has been enriched by an insider’s access to scarce but invaluable archival material as well as publicly accessible media reviews.
Conceptually, I draw extensively on Deleuze and Guattari for ways of thinking processually about movement, rhythms, transformations, connectivity and potentiality in the artform, in relation to the bodies of performers, the spaces in which they perform and the contexts that they inhabit in terms of company structures, relations with Australian governments and other artforms, and in extensive international work. In addition to a range of scholars who have worked with and through Deleuze and Guattari in various ways, I make use of key insights from Foucault, Agamben, Butler, Grosz and Probyn. Utilising ideas and approaches that are allied, or at least aligned, in their modes of working with differences and complex relations, has helped me to fashion a discussion that I believe achieves coherence, given the large but potentially unwieldy array of primary and secondary material that informs it. This discussion is also facilitated throughout by a number of core observations regarding movements and interactions of bodies in spaces, for which I found particularly valuable perspectives in works by Peta Tait, Doreen Massey and Erin Manning. Taken together, these various conceptual strands and the ways of thinking that the model have enabled me to analyse how the success of Australian contemporary circus can be found in its ideological edginess, its emphatic physicality and extreme uses of the body, its challenges to “normal” notions of physical and spatial boundedness, and its particular ways of mixing chaotic and orderly processes which produce a sense of “authenticity in performance” for audiences.

While aspects of the artform have been discussed in scholarly work (e.g. Tait, 2005) this is the first comprehensive study of Australian contemporary circus, its national development, and its international influence as a leader in innovation. As well as suggesting some approaches to understanding and conceptualising the extraordinary appeal of the sector for its participants and its audiences, I grapple with why it continues to be largely unrecognised in Australian national and state funding processes. I suggest that more serious conceptual discussion of the sector in scholarly and industry contexts might contribute to it being taken seriously in its home country, as it is internationally.
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signature:

Date: 19 February 2017

Ethical Approval

This research was conducted with full ethical approval under the requirements of Human Ethics. Ethical clearance for this project was granted on June 30, 2014. Protocol number: HUM/17/14/HREC
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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my Dad, Peter Roy Seymour who sadly passed away during my candidature. His fierce love and support for me in every step of my artistic career, and his steadfast commitment to encouraging me to pursue my academic skills, are just a small part of the role he played in helping me to become who I am today. Thank you for believing in me when I at times didn’t have the energy to believe in myself, for passing on your dry wit and no-nonsense attitude, and for ensuring that I always had the ability to chase my dreams with gusto.
Acknowledgements

First, I would like to express my deepest and most sincere gratitude to my supervisors Associate Professor Patricia Wise and Dr Peter Denney. Thank you for your ongoing passion and support for my project and for your unwavering belief in me. Peter, thank you for being a calm and consistent support and delicately reining me in when I had at least 100 more ideas than I could sensibly fit into this project. Pat, you have been an incredible mentor, leader and friend and I am extremely privileged to have had such a powerhouse woman guiding me through this complex journey. I hold myself to aspire to your standard not only as a scholar but as a human being, you are one of a kind.

I would like to acknowledge the support that I have received from Griffith University, specifically the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science, the Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, the Griffith Graduate Research School, and the Gold Coast Association of Post-Graduates. The grants and scholarships provided to me by these bodies during my candidature have greatly assisted me in attending local and international conferences, enabling me to connect my research to the wider sector.

A sincere thank you goes to École Nationale de Cirque and Cirque du Soleil Headquarters for hosting me for my 2015 research residency in Montreal, Quebec. During my time at both organisations I was immediately made to feel like “circus family”, welcomed warmly, supported in everything that I was seeking to experience and discover. In particular a warm thank you to the inimitable Anna-Karyna Barlati, who went above and beyond her role as librarian at École Nationale du Cirque, bringing me endless resources on a daily basis and indulging me in many in-depth and passionate discussions about contemporary circus.

A heartfelt thank you goes out to the wider Australian contemporary circus community for their ongoing support for this dissertation. Thank you for your openness, respect and advocacy as I undertook this research project. I am privileged to be in a position to contribute to the ongoing development of the artform with this work. Warm thanks to all of the individuals and companies who so willingly and enthusiastically contributed their time, memories and expertise. In particular I would like to express my appreciation to my interviewees, a cross section of practitioners from the sector who have been
incredibly generous with their time (see Appendix 1 for full list). This thesis is richer for your contribution to my research. Thank you to Hamish McCormick from Carnival Cinema for the wonderful images you have provided for this thesis, but also for your contribution as an archivist to the Australian circus sector, your work has been an invaluable resource.

I’d like to acknowledge Dr Reg Bolton and Gail Kelly, two especially inspiring members of our sector who have influenced my journey as an artist and a scholar. And of course, a big thank you goes to my colleagues in the Circus Corridor, in particular, Tammy Zarb, Celia White and Simone O’Brien for allowing me the space to indulge in my research while you so capably steered the ship of our company in my absence.

Special thanks to my PhD colleagues, for the warm and supportive HDR community you have fostered and welcomed me into, and in particular thank you to Zelmarie Cantillon for her consistent support and friendship.

To my dearest friends Kobie and Barbara and to my cousin Chantele, thank you for being my motivators when I felt overwhelmed, for being my shoulders to cry on and my cheerleaders. I am proud to be surrounded by such powerful women.

And lastly and most importantly my deepest gratitude goes to my wonderful partner Ryan, for his unwavering support and pride in my scholarly endeavours, for bragging about me to anyone who would listen. His patience with my endless reading and circus chatter and for holding my hand through the most challenging times. Thank you for being my “rock”.
Introduction

The project – an overview

This dissertation maps the practice features and cultural influence of contemporary circus in Australia from its emergence in the late 1970s to the present, investigating its history and its position in relation to the international development of alternative circus practice. Contemporary circus can be most readily identified as an artform that developed from the merging of classical/traditional family circus and radical/street theatre forms via “New Circus”. Within its repertoire, the artform has often been influenced by various aspects of vaudeville and cabaret performance techniques. Contemporary circus in Australia carries many sub-genres within its artistic ecology and has grown and changed consistently over its forty-year history.

Over the past decade the international field of scholarly research dedicated to contemporary circus has developed at a promising rate. Recent publications continue to build the bourgeoning research discipline with works such as The Routledge Circus Studies Reader edited by Peta Tait and Katie Lavers (2016) providing a collection of diverse articles authored by circus scholars from around the globe, including contributions focused on Australian work by Lavers and Tait themselves. Although there have been publications covering aspects of the Australian contemporary circus sector, an analysis of the national industry as a whole has not been undertaken and there has been little scholarly attention to matters such as company structures, national and international industry networks and engagements with other arts sectors, and even less attention given to an increasingly distinctive set of characteristics in performance that could form the basis of something like a practice philosophy, if such an idea is appropriate for such a fluid and dynamic sector.

This dissertation draws on extensive industry research, to develop and deploy a number of conceptual frameworks through which to analyse and discuss what emerged from that research about the circulation of certain elements of self-construction, aesthetics and practice among and between companies, individuals and training contexts. The goal of my work has been to demonstrate how cultural theory can contribute to the ways in which circus industry participants and scholars might benefit from a more comprehensive understanding of an artform in which, I argue, Australia has been and continues to be a leader. While I am not the first to make use
of cultural theory perspectives in relation to contemporary circus, I believe that I do shed new light on the sector through the particular uses I make of these frameworks.

The project had its origins in my experience as a contemporary circus practitioner and trainer, and my regular attendance at the biannual conferences of the Australian Circus and Physical Theatre Association (ACAPTA). Until 2016 ACAPTA was the peak body for the contemporary circus sector in Australia, representing all facets of the artform, from youth circus schools and emerging artists to ongoing companies and those with major international touring schedules. During a panel at the 2010 conference in Sydney it became apparent to me that contemporary circus in Australia had yet to be explored in an extensive, scholarly way that could document the rich cultural contribution the artform has made nationally and internationally. Others in the industry expressed warm support for such a project, which therefore became the focus of my PhD research.

**Circus ecologies**

Having worked as a professional circus artist since 2000, I have developed a foundation of thought and theory that has assisted in shaping the direction of my research. Early in the work I realised that if I was to position what is distinctive about the artform in Australia, it would not be sufficient to concentrate on the scope, variety and development of contemporary circus as a sector. My dissertation would also need to attend closely to the performance of the contemporary circus body in space and time. This is because there is no question that much of the appeal of Australian contemporary circus lies in its edginess, its physicality, its extreme uses of the body, its challenges to normal notions of boundedness and spaces, and its particular ways of mixing chaotic and orderly processes. I am especially keen to understand how these characteristics of style and process keep the form fresh and dynamic, and how they align with or reveal values and concepts. Through a focus on certain key companies and performances in their cultural and historical contexts I explore the extent to which the highly physical, sometimes “raw” and always risky performance aesthetic developed in Australia; how it has developed audiences nationally; and how it has influenced international practice.

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1 In 2016 ACAPTA dissolved due to loss of government funding and inability to secure other financial support to enable a sustainability. Throughout its time as the peak body for Australian contemporary circus and physical theatre, ACAPTA enabled strong local and international industry networks and advocated for the national sector globally. Currently the Theatre Arts Network is working with key industry practitioners to provide a substitute arm within its organisation.
While a detailed international comparative study was not within the scope my project, in exploring the growth of the sector’s artistic processes, national profile and distinctive performance qualities, it is essential to consider its major contribution to Australia’s international performing arts output in terms of touring activity and cultural export earnings. Many of Australia’s leading contemporary circus companies – *Circa*, *Casus*, *Company 2*, *Acrobat* and *Briefs Factory*\(^2\), for example – undertake the majority of their work overseas; Australian performers and directors are often engaged by major touring companies from other countries; and Australian companies, performers and directors have been strongly represented at international circus festivals and conferences since the emergence of the artform. My research needed to pay attention to this international export of Australian circus arts and artists because international engagement has created ongoing sustainable work for Australian circus artists and enriched the national scene in many ways. It has also been important to develop some insights into how Australian contemporary circus is positioned and received internationally in order to begin to contextualise anecdotal evidence about its influence.

There is a need for much more detailed work, but my research to date indicates that the Australian sector exerts a disproportionate degree of influence on international companies and receives a high level of popularity with international audiences. It is already clear that a significant contributing factor to this lies in the performance aesthetics and values I allude to above. Overseas as well as locally there is a discernible relationship between industry development and apparent audience perceptions of the ways in which the performance values they encounter reflect a certain “Australian” approach to disposition of bodies, and a certain irreverence in relation to matters of style, aesthetics, narrative or ideological anchors in the artistic direction of shows.

Australian contemporary circus companies have successfully developed audiences, and audience demand has impelled the rapid and continuous growth of the companies. This has created an ongoing need for increased artistic and administrative staff. I trace how this consistently contributes to the ecology of the Australian circus industry as a whole, including how it impacts on Australian circus schools and circus training institutions. Training, in turn, provides an insight into how the practice philosophy is conveyed from experienced to emerging industry participants. This is why, as

\(^2\) Briefs Factory is a production company that began from a singular show *Briefs* (2008). It now operates an umbrella production company for the creative projects of Briefs: an all-male circus and burlesque company (see Chapter Five) and *Hot Brown Honey* an all-female hip-hop theatre company. I will use the terms *Briefs* and *Briefs Factory* when referring to the work.
mentioned above, the most significant motivation for this project is my desire to enhance the conceptual frameworks available to industry participants and scholars in relation to contemporary circus practice.

Questions of time, history and current practice

As is clear from the foregoing discussion, during the first year of my research the emphasis shifted from what I initially understood as ‘a history of the artform’ to become an exploration of particular aspects and elements of that history and of the current industry picture, in order to understand the artform itself. Although a chronological history is an essential curatorial process for the maturing industry, and could constitute an excellent project to undertake with industry partners, that type of linear study was not going to allow my work to engage with the full implications of the ecology of circus that I briefly trace above. It is this ecology – featuring multiple interconnections between industry contexts, key personnel and companies, and practice developments – that has come to be my primary interest.

As my research has developed my project has thus increasingly become a conceptual and theoretical study with a historical thread as part of the methodology. Time and history remain important to uncovering the trajectory of the artform: how it has emerged from grassroots, street theatre and radical theatre based circus, with a relatively rudimentary skill level, to become characterised by highly skilled and polished work with a diverse production aesthetic. My focus is the practices and aesthetic characteristics of the form, and how they developed in the context of companies, productions and training; what it is about those characteristics that keeps people coming to see the work; and how those “home grown” characteristics are significant in relation to the international profile of Australian circus and circus artists. While the relatively short history of the artform informs its practice trajectory and cultural impact, it is how I make use of concept and theory to analyse practice that constitutes the contribution of my work to increased understanding of the artform, and helps to account for its national and international success. I uncover the importance of the training of the “circus body”, engage with the uses of bodies in the creative process, stress how notions of chaos and order interplay in circus creativity, and delineate how the spatiality of circus practice contributes to the success of Australian contemporary circus.

Background to contemporary circus

Contemporary circus emerged during the late 1970s, with three countries – Australia, France and Canada – the key players in the global development of the style. Then
called “New Circus”, in performance terms it set itself apart from the classical/traditional family circus by leaving out the animals and concentrating on the possibilities of the human body. Performances carried on most of the thrilling bodily acts one would see in the classical/traditional family circus, such as trapeze, tight wire, juggling, unicycle, human pyramids etc. as well as various aspects of clowning. However companies also began to introduce recent advances in media and lighting, live music and the use of non-traditional sites such as theatres and outdoor venues to create what is now known as contemporary circus.

In Australia contemporary circus did not completely sever its associations with classical/traditional circus. Ties to famous family circus companies were formed during the development of the new style, and in the early days of contemporary circus, Ashton’s and others were involved in passing on skills training to major emerging companies such as Circus Oz and the Flying Fruit Fly Circus (FFFC). Micky Ashton is still remembered as an original trainer at FFFC.

It is important to note that contemporary circus in Australia encompasses many genres and/or styles: some companies are likened to physical theatre (e.g. Legs on the Wall, Sydney); some are similar in style to contemporary dance (e.g. Circa, Brisbane); while others echo vaudeville and cabaret (e.g. Briefs Factory, Brisbane). Unlike classical/traditional circus, which is always performed in a Big Top tent, contemporary circus is now performed in a very wide range of settings, from high art venues (e.g. Sydney Opera House, Playhouse Theatre at Queensland Performing Arts Centre) to Spiegel tents and outdoor rigs at arts and theatre festivals (e.g. the Adelaide Festival Fringe, the Brisbane Festival, the Festival of Sydney) to underground or “fringe”-like nightclubs and cabaret clubs (e.g. Family nightclub Brisbane, Slide nightclub Sydney). It has become a feature of contemporary circus that it can appear anywhere and often adapts to its settings in a way that invites its audience to step into a parallel universe for the duration of the performance.

Research questions: framing the focus for the inquiry

In order to investigate the historical, cultural and practice significance of Australian contemporary circus I formulated a series of key research questions which could steer my inquiry towards an expansive analysis that allowed a diverse range of perspectives of the artform to surface but avoided the dangers of over-expanding the project in terms of the elements to be covered and the research to be undertaken. These key questions allowed me to frame my research such that there was a consistent direction or
trajectory, and a specific set of themes to be explored, while the purview remained broad enough to maintain a “big picture” perspective on the artform in its entirety. To enable more detailed exploration of specific focus areas that were of interest to me both as a practitioner and a researcher, while functioning as examples in Agamben’s usage of that concept (see below: “Themes and conceptual frameworks”, “Survey of literature and resources” and “Methodology”) I also developed a series of sub-questions. These provided the context for the field research, and a number of more detailed case studies and discussions, through which I could unpack certain areas of interest, provide examples to help demonstrate particular strands of the argument and position these within the more general field of the dissertation as a whole.

**Key Research Questions**

- What is it about Australian contemporary circus – in terms of characteristic aspects of practice, conceptual frameworks, artistic values and ideological/political choices – that has seen it grow into a major artform?
- What are the distinctive aspects of the form as revealed/identified by those who have been involved in its development?
- What has grown audiences and kept them coming back?
- What aspects of Australian contemporary circus account for its international influence and success?
- How can a focus on bodies and spatiality in relation to the creative process in contemporary circus contribute to the development of effective conceptual frameworks for industry and scholars?

**Sub-questions**

These were developed in relation to the research design, the case studies, and thematic analysis and discussion of the research outcomes.

1. Industry

- How does Australian contemporary circus influence the work of its national and international industry peers?
- What impact has Australian contemporary circus had on the artform internationally?

2. Audiences
• How do circus, and arts festivals incorporating circus build, audience for the artform and change the perception of “what circus is” for a general audience?
• What are some of the factors that explain the appeal of Australian contemporary circus to international audiences?

3. Artistic processes and communities

• What kinds of creative processes do Australian contemporary circus artists use to make their work?
• How do companies/artists fund artistic development and other aspects of making work?
• How does the artform build community and identity?
• How does circus as an artform provide ways and means to challenge cultural stereotypes and encourage eccentricity?

4. Time

• How has the industry managed changing practices, structures and training needs over the past 35 years?
• In what ways has contemporary circus been “of its time” and “ahead of its time”?
• What part do notions of time play in the practice of circus – in creating, rehearsing and performing acts and shows?

5. Bodies

• How does contemporary circus challenge the expectations of the body in performance?
• How does circus, as a training discipline, change and free the body?
• How do circus bodies impact on cultural identity, challenge gender stereotypes and encourage the valuing of difference?

6. Spaces

• How does circus respond to the spaces available to it?
• How does circus alter the spaces it occupies?
• How does the use of space in circus performance impact on audiences?
• Why do some Australian cities host more artists and circus training spaces than other cities? And what is the impact of this on artistic process and collaboration?

**Conceptual Framework**

In the course of my research I identified several conceptual strands that became central to my thinking and in turn, therefore, formed the bases of the conceptual framework for the project as a whole. These conceptual and/or theoretical strands, informed by significant scholarly discussions in cultural theory, became recurring ideas and influences the by which processes I approached my own thinking as well as my interviews with industry practitioners, and my discussion of practice developments, aesthetics and performance values. I recognised that these concepts and the processes/practices associated with them can be particularly valuable in how we encounter and write about the specificities, situatedness, singularities, affinities, collectivities, connectivities, layers and dynamics of interrelation in Australian contemporary circus as an artform and as an industry. Beyond the conceptual and theoretical strands I identified three key themes. With consistent acknowledgement that each is an assemblage by definition open to relations with the others, these themes operate as focussing devices for the research, analysis and discussion (see “Themes” below).

The conceptual strands are open to connecting with each other in various fluid, disruptive and settled ways to form a conceptual framework for the work as a whole. Each strand is in itself not a settled concept, but taken together they present a means of engaging with a practice that is itself not settled and unlikely ever to be:

*Rhizomes and rhizomic processes*

Drawing, in particular, on Deleuze and Guattari – and others who have worked with their multiple shifting and related concepts – Australian contemporary circus can be understood as a rhizome, in that it abides by “principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be” (Deleuze and Guatarri, 1987, p.7). As artform and industry it is characterised by rhizomic practices and processes. For instance, it exhibits the “principle of multiplicity” (1987, p.8). “Multiplicities”, Deleuze and Guattari observe “are defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialization according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities” (1987, p.9). Contemporary Australian circus also exemplifies the “principle of asignifying rupture”, that is, it is very
difficult to pin down, indeed, it will not be pinned down: it is always already moving on to the next thing. “A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (1987: 9), and as a practice, or multiplicity of practices, contemporary circus in Australia behaves in these ways – shifting, morphing, breaking into new forms, exchanging personnel and styles, deftly occupying unexpected spaces to turn them to its own uses. This is not to say it is without organising principles and structures, or formalised relations, but that these are consistently open to new connections, new forms, new arrangements.

Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees. There is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome. These lines always tie back to one another. (1987, p.9)

The contemporary circus sector overlaps within itself, with sub-genres and styles that often share features and are not clearly distinguished. Key companies that pioneered and influenced the emergence of contemporary circus in Australia did not function as the centre or origin of the form, nor are they seen that way. Rather they have become nodes, connected in various ways through how they have inspired, encouraged and enabled the emergence of other companies which in turn became nodes and so on. Practitioners interact within and move between companies, training settings and performance venues. Skills, practices and artistic values move with them. And in each practice moment, highly patterned and habitual skills collide with fresh ideas in apparent accidents of creative imagination, assembling themselves into process rhizomes. “Let us summarize the characteristics of the rhizome,” Deleuze and Guattari write:

Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature, it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five etc. It is not a multiple derived from the One, or to which One is added (n+1). It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills. (1987, p. 21)

My experience, observations and research outcomes suggest that Australian contemporary circus has rhizomic characteristics in its history, structure and cross-
influences, and in its practice processes, including the ways in which skills and creative choices interact in training, artistic development, rehearsal and performance.

**Questions of embodiment**

The body is, of course, central to contemporary circus, whose performers experience a particularly highly tuned engagement with their own embodiment. Their movements can be so skilled and habituated that they might be training a trapeze act while mentally compiling a grocery list, yet at same time they experience their own bodies and senses in highly conscious ways only familiar to most people in circumstances such as severe illness or sexual ecstasy. Other aspects of embodiment – its links to identity, belonging and associated notions of community – recur in most areas of my research, and appear to be directly implicated in how contemporary circus sets itself apart from comparative artforms such as dance, gymnastics and theatre. In order to explore this, I rely, among others, on various aspects of the work of Foucault, Grosz, Probyn and Agamben (see “Survey of literature and resources” below).

**Chaos and order**

Creative practices of all kinds make use of the play between chaos and order, and at least since the ancient Greeks, chaos has been seen as a necessary condition for the emergence of new forms of expression. Circus overtly invites audiences to notice the extent to which it relies on the extremely ordered performance of the disciplined body, with or without interaction with various apparatus and other bodies, yet also invites them to experience how it uses chaotic creative engagements to produce its edgy artistic outcomes. Circus frequently creates an appearance of chaos in performance – several different acts occurring at once, clowning interrupting expectations of the apparent focus of a moment, bodies crossing over with each other in apparently disorderly ways – in order to produce a greater sense of danger, risk and surprise for the audience. The idea of chaosmosis, as deployed by Guattari (1995), has informed my thinking here, as has Reg Bolton’s (2004) work on creative chaos in circus training and creative process.

**Heterotopias and spatiality**

Foucault (1986) uses the term “heterotopia” in many ways, but it is frequently understood to describe spaces of otherness, of difference (hence “hetero”). He is interested in the kinds of spaces that hold more meaning, more layers, more features than they may appear to hold, and/or than we expect; spaces that are more complex than they may be perceived to be at first glance. They are often, but not always,
mundane spaces. "Heterotopic" is a term that invites us to recognise that space is never empty, never without meaning, and that in spaces difference both exists and generates (see also Massey, 2011; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Agamben, 1993). My thinking about circus spaces recognises that social, geophysical, cultural and creative spaces are marked by multiplicity, plurality, flexibility, shifting and permeable borders. These heterotopic characteristics of circus spaces characterise the practice, its processes and its artistic outcomes for artists and audiences.

**Themes**

*Using themes as structuring mechanisms*

As mentioned earlier throughout the development of my ideas, I have arranged my analysis into three main thematic areas: Time, Bodies and Spaces. This became a structuring device for the main discussion in the dissertation. The conceptual strands outlined above and the theoretical terrains I draw on in developing those inform my thematic discussion, in conjunction with the interview and archival data that enabled me to identify these themes and concepts as particularly significant for contemporary circus as a practice and as an industry sector. Within the dissertation as a whole, concepts and themes of course overlap and intersect. I have used the themes in a non-linear fashion, in a deliberate reflection of the rhizomic nature of the artform, its styles, genres and processes, the professional lives of the artists who operate within it and the companies they have developed and moved between.

**Time**

As explained earlier, contemporary circus emerged in Australia in the late 1970s. I begin my exploration from 1977 and through the interviews, archives and analysis, examine aspects of the history between then and the present. In the early stages of the artform’s history the main initial Australian companies were, *Soap Box Circus* and *New Circus*, both of which arose in conjunction with the dynamic activity then characteristic of Melbourne’s radical theatre scene (*La Mama*, *The Pram Factory/Australian Performing Group*). Thus, Australian contemporary circus demonstrates direct links to both classical/traditional family circus and radical theatre practice from the outset. These influences are evident in the early work of *Soap Box Circus* and *New Circus* whose stylistic influences were from street theatre combined with basic circus and physical theatre skills, to create what became the new genre of circus. These two companies merged in 1978 to form the beginnings of *Circus Oz* and later went on to develop high order circus skills through training programs like the
Nanjing Projects I and II which shaped the future not only of Circus Oz but of contemporary circus in as a whole. I map the trajectory of the artform in Chapter One.

Influential circus director and former director of ACAPTA, Gail Kelly, observed in her opening remarks for the 2014 ACAPTA conference that: “Circus is a resilient beast, cut one head off and four more grow in its place.” This clearly sits readily with Deleuze and Guattari’s various descriptions of rhizomes and rhizomic movements, for example:

A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines or on new lines. You can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and time again after most of it has been destroyed. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 9)

Like most artforms, contemporary circus has gone through low and high points, periods of sluggishness and periods of rich creative activity and thriving development. This affects the kinds of work made and can readily impel the emergence of new, vital work as well as the formation of ongoing collaborations and partnerships. Thus a theme of time draws attention to moments of historical importance, helping to map periods of growth and expansion in the reach of the artform as well as the practice characteristics and values that emerge during such periods. Attending to such periods can help us to understand how contemporary circus emerged, developed, broke into different companies and activities, regenerated and reconnected to establish its multiple sub-genres. This can also help to account for how and why the artform continues to build its audience and extend its audience demographics.

There are certain historical moments that industry figures agree have been crucial and central to the development of the art form, and I examine how each has contributed to shaping the sector as it has become. From influential Chinese master trainers visiting to share high-level skills (Nanjing Projects I and II) and the emergence of major companies and international touring, to the opening of a dedicated tertiary circus institution (the National Institute of Circus Arts – NICA) significant landmarks and turning points have contributed to how the artform understands itself; how it is seen by audiences; and how it is regarded by the international circus sector and wider performing arts and festival communities.

My early recognition of the appropriateness of the concept of rhizomes and rhizomics to this project enabled ways of thinking that were alert to the emergence of additional nodes and movements. I came to understand the sector in terms of ebbs and flows of change and to notice how strongly connections, intensities, ruptures, segmentarities,
offshoots, lines of flight and emergences contributed to the development of contemporary circus in Australia. Deleuze and Guattari stress that:

> It is not a question of this or that place on earth, or of a given moment in history, still less of this or that category of thought. It is a question of a model that is perpetually in construction or collapsing, and of a process that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again. (1987, p.20)

This matter of ebbs and flows, breaks and conjunctions, is as true of particular sites of practice as it is of industry development more broadly. During my interview with independent artist Natano Fa’anana, he discussed the question of time and timing with regard to work in which we had both participated in the Brisbane contemporary circus community. He stressed how activity peaked and ebbed – what new work came out of our collegial enthusiasm, what skills training was developed and, indeed, what was lost along the way:

> Going back to that thing … how there was a bit of a lull in the Bris community. I think there was a bunch of people five or six years ago with a need, and they built a reputation; they built shows. The shows elevated to a point where they took off, which means it left a gap [in the local field]. We were so focused on making our own work and getting it out there [into the wider world] that we are finally out there – but we weren't around to support the next wave. (Natano Fa’anana, Aerialist/Acrobat, Interview, August 2014)

His observations were particularly insightful, especially the recognition that once shows that had preoccupied our creative energies became so successful that we were perpetually away on tour, this left a gap in the mentoring and training of emerging circus artists in Queensland. This raises the particular challenges of ensuring generational succession in contemporary circus, which does not have the same kind of company structures that marked classical circus. It is vital to remember how strongly circus practice relies on the passing on of highly focused suites of bodily skills in particular process elements and apparatuses from one “generation” to the next. The family structures of classical/traditional circus enabled this aspect of training to take place regardless of touring schedules. However, the more fluid and temporary relationships that occur in contemporary circus mean that unless we become aware of the likely impact of temporality on opportunities for skills development – for example when a small company or group of acts leaves the region on extended national and international touring schedules with a particular show – regional development of the art and its artists can be seriously disrupted, even stopped in its tracks. There is, of course, an irony here in that the capacity for fluidity, change, movement of personnel
between companies, reshaping of companies, rapid emergence of new forms and so on, that I have highlighted as rhizomic, is exactly what gives contemporary circus its extraordinary capacity for creative change. Without awareness of one of my driving scholarly concepts, Natano Fa’anana readily acknowledged the strengths of our ways of working but at the same time recognised the dangers. He has therefore made a point of contributing to training during his periods off the road, in turn encouraging the next wave of artistic output of the Brisbane circus industry. Similarly, from a time when I would have been thinking purely in terms of the well-being of the practice, I have set up a range of initiatives in youth circus, so that the artform is always being renewed.

Phases of “feast and famine” in the relations between creative development and training, have occurred in various parts of Australia. Collaborations develop or disconnect, artists move to other states or cities, and this creates multiple ripple effects that can radically change the directions of skills training and artistic development, disrupting or enriching circus practice. Thus an awareness of rhizomics and how they are operating in the sites of contemporary circus practice can encourage the kinds of recognitions that leave the artform open, in Deleuzian terms, to “lines of flight”, to new creative directions, while at the same time ensuring that the consistencies of training and skills enhancement continue to operate. Various regional and national training initiatives make a major contribution to maintaining the vitality of a mature sector, and these continue to rely on the input of established practitioners to pass on their skills.

Looked at with hindsight it is as if we happened to stumble across the recognition of what we needed to do in order to organise succession in this “new” form of circus. However, if we develop conceptual frameworks that help us to understand how the industry works and therefore work knowingly with its movements, we are more likely to develop means to address issues before they emerge. Further, if we have an awareness of the key moments and also the happenstance elements involved in changes in our artform over time, we are more likely to bring that awareness together with our understandings about how the artform works to pre-empt what could just as readily be accidental downturns as injections of new energy and creative development.

_Bodies_

The body is absolutely central to contemporary circus. Circus bodies defy gravity, and in order to surprise audience perceptions of bodily possibilities, circus bodies break through boundaries of pain, frequently defying practitioners’ own preconceptions about their bodily limits and capacities. Circus bodies not only enter into risky physical
terrains in relation to what bodies can do, but also challenge social and cultural ideas about what bodies should (or should not) do. Circus challenges social constraints in relation to gender expectations, transforming “gender norms”: indeed, it can jettison them completely. Similarly, circus has repeatedly invited reconsideration of questions of ability and “disability” by demonstrating the remarkable capabilities of any body, given sufficient encouragement, confidence and skills appropriate to the needs, desires and potentials of that particular body.

In “Circus Bodies as Theatre Animals”, Peta Tait notes that:

In numerous examples, cultural texts refer to a generalised category that conflates performance modes with circus performers’ bodies and the status of the circus community as outside that of the dominant culture, and this grouping is then merged with other marginalised outsiders such as tramps and gipsies. It is not surprising then that while its performing bodies might become reduced to an idea of pure theatricality, circus has become associated with ideas of grotesqueness and freakness. (1999, pp. 131-2)

There is no question that these tendencies for circus and its performers to be positioned as “outside”, reduced to “pure theatricality” in a realm of the grotesque and the freak are especially significant in relation to contemporary circus. Not only do they help to explain the many ways in which the artform does not sit comfortably with dominant notions of art and artistry, but crucially, contemporary circus practitioners and companies embrace such constructions: they are central to what we do and how we think about what we do. In acting on desires to achieve the impossible with our bodies achieve things that are apparently outside of what is “normal”. This means that we cross into a liminal zone in which there is, for an onlooker, a constant movement to and fro between “amazing” and “freaky”, a movement marked by gasps, expressions of delight, expressions of fear, and eyes peeping through fingers that hide and uncover the scary-but-fascinating sight. Choreographed movement of bodies in such liminal zones is as characteristic of classical circus as it is of contemporary circus. However, in Australian contemporary circus and sideshow, which rely entirely on human bodies doing exceptional things, the whole production or act often positions itself entirely on the “other” side of the threshold that, for most audience members, marks an imagined absolute limit on what human bodies can do. Such a show can readily be experienced as disturbing, and its performers can just as readily be seen as abnormal, as “freaks”, albeit exceptionally and admirably talented “freaks”. Their bodies can be seen – if only

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3 Although in classical circus the presence of actual animals in the production doubtless helps to highlight the continuing humanity of the human performers.
temporarily – as “grotesque” because they are doing things that seem “not-quite-human”. The same audience members will afterwards describe the show as “incredible”, “astonishing”, “wonderful”, even “magic”.

What is happening here for audience members feels like an encounter with an uncanny otherness, even as their rational selves warmly appreciate the skills and production values of the performers and the show. What is happening for performers (and their support crews) is unstintingly rational, skilful, calculated, measured and above all, practised. Everything that happens is already known to be doable and possible, again and again. The question, then, is not, “how did that human do that humanly impossible thing?” but rather, “how did that human overcome her own limits on the humanly possible?”

I will argue that in circus the “impossibilities” or limitations of the body are, effectively, disregarded. Determining their own limitations and boundaries in relation to their bodies, circus performers do not subscribe to the limitations that most people accept as “normal”. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the Body without Organs (BwO) has been extremely useful in exploring how circus bodies “un-do themselves” or “un-do” the idea of how bodies must be and how they should be presented or “lived in”. Understood most simply, a BwO is basically a body without social coding or order. That is, it is a body that operates outside of and without the kind of organisation provided by its social, cultural and political position. Such a body has chosen its own way of being and becoming. As Deleuze and Guattari explain:

> Let us consider the three great strata concerning us, in other words the ones that most directly bind us: the organism, significance, and subjectification. The surface of the organism, the angle of significance and interpretation, and the point of subjectification or subjection. You will be organised, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body – otherwise you are just depraved. You will be signifier, signified, interpreter and interpreted – otherwise you’re just a deviant. You will be a subject, nailed down as one, a subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of a statement – otherwise you’re just a tramp. (1987, p.159)

There is an affinity between these remarks and Tait’s observations referred to above. It is my view that circus bodies demonstrate resistance and defiance in their desire to be “other”. Acrobats and jugglers, aerialists and sword swallowers, fire-eaters and contortionists all take the idea, “that cannot be done” and set out to prove that indeed it can be if one has the desire and determination to make it so. Frequently they achieve their desires. In this sense, they choose to be dis-organised, asignifying unsubjected subjects. Circus artists create their own “rules” that are concerned with breaking “the
rules” concerning bodily capacities, demeanours, properties and proprieties. They make the apparently impossible happen.

Some interesting perspectives about this matter of the limitations and possibilities of the body, and how circus artists do what they do, emerged during my interview with circus director and clown Ira Seidenstein. In speaking about training the circus body in both technical execution of a skill and “authenticity” in performance of a skill, he said:

Particularly I am interested that in the repetition you increase your awareness, rather than the technical virtuosity. So you start to find the creative space of the movement in your mind and in your joints. I think also in terms of circus, part of the problem that I see is the need for fluidity of the joints, more movement. One of the things I have started to do patiently is that I am trying to say that when we think of movement, whether it’s circus or dance, it’s not codified movement. I am looking for authentic movement. So how do you do the high-level technical circus skill and still have authentic movement, that’s the damn thing?! (Ira Seidenstein, Director/Clown, Interview, October 2014)

Ira’s struggle with the apparent tension between “codified” movement and “authentic” movement obviously brings to mind Deleuze and Guattari’s recognition of the inevitable tensions created by hegemonic demands that we be “organised”, “signifying” subjects. It also, in some ways, recalls Foucault’s analysis of how bodies are “disciplined” through social and behavioural processes of repetition and codification such that the degree of discipline they feel and exhibit is apparently “natural”. However, there is little left that is allowed to be “natural” about the bodies to which Foucault refers – they have become what he calls “docile bodies”. Seidenstein, on the other hand, has no desire for circus discipline to produce a docile body, but he does want the disciplined body to be as if it is “natural” in the sense that it does not appear rehearsed or “disciplined” at all. This is what accounts for the audience impacts I refer to above – the sense that one has witnessed an impossible thing. There is clearly a paradox involved in the fact that producing “authentic” movement within a circus body requires structure, discipline, repetition and desire.

For Foucault, “the historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the

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4 This is not surprising, given Deleuze’s friendship with Foucault, and more importantly, the influence of Foucault’s thinking on Deleuze and Guattari’s work together.

5 The same can be observed about what is sought in other performing arts in which the aim is to disguise the “artistry” (e.g. acting) rather than draw attention to it (e.g. classical ballet).
mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely” (1975:138). While the point of this post-Enlightenment disciplining of the body is to bring the subject into obedient and useful relations with the authority of the social, Foucault’s thinking about bodily discipline is nevertheless useful for how we understand the circus body, which becomes more “obedient” and “useful” in relation to its own capacities and performative desires – that is, as it taps into its desire to perform extreme physical feats, to push physical limits, rather than conforming to a view that “bodies shouldn’t do that” or equally that “you shouldn’t do that to your body”.

Elizabeth Grosz describes the potential for a body to enter into relations with itself, becoming “no longer a body docile with respect to power, but more a body docile to will, desire, and mind” (1994, p.2). This speaks to how we can understand circus bodies as “desiring machines” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), in that their desire to achieve “authenticity” in performance fuels the will to train for active and highly skilled relations with themselves, their apparatus and/or other bodies. Experienced as apparently “unconscious”, fluid interaction with themselves as whole subjects simultaneously open to such interaction with the whole act – other performers, apparatus, space, sound, lighting and so on – desire impels body-mind-senses-materiality as an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Thus desire enables performers to exceed the perceived limitations of the body: pain thresholds are challenged, muscles are pushed past the point of fatigue and bodies achieve things that bodies are not usually expected to achieve, that may appear “superhuman” and/or “unnatural” while conveying, and frequently experiencing, ease, naturalness and the effect that Seidenstein refers to as “authenticity”. For the circus artist the aim is “mastery” of the skills, not over the body. The goal is always to work with the body in testing the boundaries of what embodied subjects can do.

Such displays of acrobatic artistry also mix up and re-package gender norms. Female circus bodies are often strong and muscular; male circus bodies are often gentle and elegant. Tait describes how

[a]erialists in the nineteenth century were attributed qualities that mixed up their gender identity. The aerial action of males was praised for manly daring and for graceful lightness and poise, qualities of movement that were more conventionally the preserve of femininity. Similarly, female aerialists were described as beautiful, and as adventurous and courageous, traits considered manly. (2005, p. 9)

Contemporary circus bodies do not subscribe or conform to normative gender expectations. We can see this very clearly in the work of Acrobat and Briefs Factory
(see Chapters Four and Five respectively) whose enthusiastic, overt celebration of transgressive bodies is taken to be routine in current contemporary circus and is warmly appreciated by audiences and in media reviews. In fact, all manner of gender transgression has been a hallmark of Australian contemporary circus from its earliest days. For example, throughout the history of Circus Oz its strongwoman acts, from artists such as Anni Davey and Mel Fyfe, have received positive reviews. I do not mean to imply that transgression is so accepted that audiences leave all their gender expectations at the door of the venue. In my own experience as an aerialist, reviewers and the public initially expressed politely surprised appreciation of the fact that "such a short woman" can exhibit strength and skill. However, regular spectators quickly come to expect that contemporary circus will ignore gendered boundaries, knowing that this has become a characteristic of the form. Explorations of this and other aspects of non-normative bodies are therefore a significant strand in this dissertation.

In considering bodies in Australian contemporary circus, it is very important to acknowledge the historical significance of major training projects that greatly enhanced the physicality of the artform. The most important of these was the introduction of Chinese acrobatic techniques through the Nanjing Projects. In Farrell’s analysis, from the first Nanjing Project in the early 1980s,

the Chinese training method taught the Australian participants a clear process of learning that progresses by degrees of difficulty to extend their physical skills from “good to better” and finally “best” for each individual within the timeframe of the Nanjing Project. I propose that through the difficulty and possibly the physical trauma that appears to have accompanied the Chinese training philosophy at the Nanjing Project, new circus performers experienced self-development and the mastering of circus skills as an embodied, temporal, disciplinary process. This seems to have provided for a hybrid cultural acrobatic identity that spread into Australian New Circus performances. (2007, p.200)

These training techniques became central to several major Australian companies, especially Flying Fruit Fly Circus and Circus Oz, both of which have been historically and are currently significant “nurseries” for youth circus and emerging circus artists. Further, the Chinese approach to circus training as taught by Mr Lu – directly, as well through training the trainers – has underpinned and continues to inform the work of the National Institute of Circus Arts. It could be said that the first Nanjing Project changed circus bodies in Australia, and that Mr Lu’s ongoing influence and subsequent Nanjing Projects have furthered this process. Few in the sector would question that Chinese training methods changed the perception of how far Australian contemporary circus could go in terms of its skill levels in a wide range of acrobatic techniques and
engagement with apparatus for juggling, aerial work, hoops, ropes and so on. Artists were also introduced to new skills through the kinds of acts associated with traditional Chinese circus, such as hoop diving, Chinese pole, teeterboard and group bike. In Chapter Three I explore in detail the influence of classical Chinese circus techniques on Australian circus bodies.

This also provides insight into how the enhanced physicality and expanded range of available elements brought to Australian artists by their opportunities to experience Chinese training came together with a marked vitality and edginess that had their basis in the early connections of contemporary circus with radical theatre and physical theatre. In developing new work and melding acts together into shows, creative focus has often been found in the social, cultural, political and/or ideological projects that preoccupied Australian arts and artists at particular times.

Nevertheless, despite the importance of the Nanjing projects, which are understandably seen as core to how the artform developed in Australia, the physicality of performance values, the uses of creativity, and the development of an artistic aesthetic were generated by a more complex array of influences. Discovering more about those is a major rationale for bringing together historical investigations of the factual kind (what happened when and who was involved) with organisational investigations (what informed choices about company structure, management, governance, funding etc) and artistic investigations (what creative choices were made and why). Each of these aspects of my research invited participants to talk about themselves as key contributors to the development of the sector, but also to talk about their relations with others. Every part of circus relies on people working together, on community.

Spaces

A thematic of space/spatiality emerged early in my conversations with industry participants and in my engagements with the literature. It was soon clear that this would need to be a major focus of my project. The theme has led me to explore the intriguing nature of circus spaces, in which chaos is rife and discipline is constant; where creativity flares and organisation supports it. In training and rehearsal space, theatre and outdoor performance, spectacle and festival, circus has the ability to transform a space and create virtual worlds. I am interested in how contemporary circus, and particular acts of circus, alter, change, even completely transform the social coding of the spaces they occupy. Working with an idea of creative chaos I develop an argument
that circus needs to foster spaces that are open to chaos to support aspects of a
creative process that requires a continuous play between chaos and order. This has
involved consideration of the kinds of spaces in which circus takes place; how the
artists using those spaces interact with each other as well as with the space; how
spatiality contributes to performance; and how audiences react to/in different spaces.
None of this emphasis on chaos means to suggest that circus lacks organisation or
management. However, it does invite attention to the particular role that various kinds
of chaos play in the sites, modes and processes of contemporary circus in Australia.

I have investigated circus cities (see Chapter Two) to consider why and how some
cities in Australia house the majority of industry members and showcase the majority
of works of contemporary circus. I uncover how circus spaces create hubs that feed
into the wider industry, producing ongoing growth and development for the next
generation of artists in each city it occupies. This, in turn, is linked to how circus
communities develop; how the sector as a whole demonstrates elements of
community; how ideas and/or feelings of “belonging” emerge in such settings; and how
artistic outcomes are affected by the spaces in which they are created, including the
extent to which those spaces develop feelings of inclusion, community, belonging.

Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) rhizomics again provide a useful conceptual apparatus
in exploring how/why circus develops in particular spaces, geographically and
culturally, and how it moves within, across and between cities and regions. Equally
useful are the ways in which Deleuze and Guattari think about how space is
distributed/distributes itself in relation to the social and how the social organises and
disorganises itself in relation to the spaces it occupies. They provide a series of ways
of conceptualising these matters, including notions of assemblage and of different
“consistencies”, but here I want to consider the movement between “striated spaces”
and “smooth spaces”. Social, political and cultural settings are always subject to
various forces that result in them becoming more or less disorganised. Deleuze and
Guattari (1987) explain how the more they are organised, coded and managed, the
more “molarised”, stratified and shot through with lines of force – or “striated” – they
become. However, as the intensity of order moves into fascistic or micro-fascistic
arrangements, where attempts to order a social, political and/or cultural space are so
extreme as to prevent anything/anybody(any idea from challenging from within,
escaping or entering, the more likely it is that the order will implode and/or rupture, so
“molecularising”, and becoming completely dis-ordered – or “smooth” space.
In democratic settings, these movements between order and disorder need to be thought about in terms of degrees of striation and degrees of smooth. For example, as the political life or the cultural politics of nations, states, regions or cities swing between various degrees of conservatism or liberalism, the ways in which and the extent to which institutions such as the bureaucracy or arts organisations are managed, ordered, striated, veer accordingly. In these ways, the social, cultural and geographical spaces in which circus takes place become more or less amenable to the challenges that circus can represent. Those challenges might range from how circus bodies threaten normative constructions of gender or demeanour, to how circus shows might be thematised through political or social satire and the choices circus artists and companies make in relation to certain ideas. For circus companies, how smooth or striated their operating environment has become can have a significant bearing on access to funding, licences to stage outdoor performances, the exercise of overt censorship and so on.

Nevertheless, there is clearly a great deal of scope for the strong sense of smooth space – performative, social, cultural, political – that circus generates to move “outwards”, as it were, into the social and cultural spaces it inhabits. The smooth space of circus as indoor or outdoor spectacle is increasingly appearing in the wider spaces of Australian culture: circus festivals; circus in the fringe or at the centre of mainstream arts festivals; contemporary circus as part of large scale sporting events such as the Sydney Olympic Games, the forthcoming Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast, and football tournaments; and circus present at public celebrations of national milestones. There are thus more and more opportunities for circus to change the social order by its presence in public spaces.

I have explored the extent to which approaches to training, artistic development and rehearsal create sufficiently smooth physical and conceptual space for the whole group to generate maximum creative energy and maximum physical inventiveness while maintaining maximum safety. Similarly, I have discussed how the performance space can operate smoothly enough to create the illusion of disorder. My use here of the qualifying terms, “sufficiently” and “enough”, matters: for Deleuze and Guattari there is no completely smooth space nor is there a completely striated space (other than momentarily).

No sooner do we note a simple opposition between the two kinds of space than we must indicate a much more complex difference by virtue of which the successive terms of the oppositions fail to coincide entirely. And no sooner have we done that than we must remind ourselves that the two
spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space. (1987, p.474)

I have been strongly influenced by Doreen Massey’s (2005) argument that “space” is never in fact “empty”. She demonstrates that it is misguided to draw distinctions between “space” and “place” on the basis that human usage and/or representational practices produce a “place”, with meanings associated with it, out of a “space” that is by definition empty – and thus without “meaning”. Because I am keen to maintain a focus on the complex relations of embodiment and spatiality in contemporary circus, Massey’s ideas have proved very useful in helping me to think in terms of differences and multiplicities within and between spaces, how space can be perceived as a series of heterogeneous interrelations, and how spaces can evolve, change and influence culture. This thinking is also particularly relevant to contemporary circus and the communities it creates or encompasses. I argue that each circus tends to build itself out of, and sustain itself as, a community of outsiders who find ways to connect, create, belong and become. This occurs partly because of the people involved but largely because of the circus space itself. Whether they come together in a training space, a tent, an outdoor festival or a theatre, circus people interact in and through the circus spaces they occupy in order to undertake acts of circus and create circus acts.

In *for space* (2005) Massey describes the multiplicities within space that allow productive interrelations to occur, offering “a few propositions”:

First, that we recognise space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny… Second, that we understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity. Without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity, no space. If space is indeed the product of interrelations, then it must be predicated upon the existence of plurality. Multiplicity and space as co-constitutive. (2005, p.9)

I have already mentioned quite a few aspects of the many “distinct trajectories” that make up Australian contemporary circus, noting that I examine artistic process, performance spaces and outcomes.

In exploring the multiplicities that occur in circus spaces and how they provide opportunities for chaos and order to merge, I include social circus projects, in which artists use circus as a tool for therapy or social change (see Chapter Seven). For example, I have worked with refugee communities and currently work with the autistic
community, using circus to bridge social and physical gaps. The spaces in which this type of contemporary circus work takes place are crucial to how successful it can be in connecting to communities and to each individual participating in the workshop. Those spaces are also crucial to how authentic in can feel, in the sense of actually speaking with and from the experience of the people it sets out to assist.

Space, in other words, impacts in all sorts of ways on how people “belong” and thus on their senses of identity. In Outside Belongings (1996) Elspeth Probyn undoes identity politics and the politics of identity by suggesting how important it is for us to recognise and cultivate “proximal relations”. In developing these ideas she provides a range of concepts and terms in relation to belonging that helped me to understand how contemporary circus approaches identity – in particular how the artform and its community readily enable individuals to belong on many platforms in many ways without being “boxed in” or having to change how/who they are so that they can “fit in”. Probyn argues for the usefulness of taking up a position “outside belonging”. To put her subtle and carefully theorised position simply: rather than trying to find an identity and sense of belonging by struggling to fit oneself into categories of sameness to others, it is more productive of happiness, more appropriate to our own desires, to accept that we are all, in fact, different (even those who constitute themselves as “the same”) and that each of us can “approximate belonging” in one way or another by relating to others in and with our differences. Probyn makes use of Giorgio Agamben’s (1993) conceptualisation of the singularity. Given the importance of identity and belonging in my work, I have found the ideas he outlines in The Coming Community (1993) particularly useful. Agamben situates each person as a singularity, and “the coming community” as a coming together of singularities in various kinds of affinity, by choice rather than by birth, geography, national, racial or social identity.

Circus provides a safe and eccentric space for its artists, themselves often eccentric, to be just as they are. This is the opening paragraph of the opening essay in The Coming Community:

The coming being is whatever being. In the Scholastic enumeration of transcendentals (quodlibet ens est unum, verum, bonum seu perfectum – whatever entity is one, true good, perfect), the term that, remaining unthought in each, conditions the meaning of all the others is the adjective quodlibet. The common translation of this terms as ‘whatever’ in the sense of ‘it does not matter which, indifferently’ is certainly correct, but in its form the Latin says exactly the opposite: Quodlibet ens is not ‘being, it does not matter which,’ but rather ‘being such that it always matters.’ The Latin
always already contains, that is, an original relation to desire. (Agamben, 1993, p.1)\(^6\)

In current Anglophone popular culture, we cannot resist imagining the first translation of “whatever” as accompanied by a shrug of the shoulders that indeed carries a sense of indifference. Agamben’s translation of *quodlibet ens*, “being such that it always matters”, emerges in the essays that follow as an extraordinarily useful basis for how we can understand and practise ethics in contemporary, secularised contexts. That is, it offers a solution to the dilemma that confronts people who don’t know how to “do” morality when it is not given to them by a transcendent being as a list of rules or “commandments”, and not defined and regulated by a metaphysical-theological framework.

However, what is particularly useful for my discussion of circus is to notice that between the translation of *quodlibet ens* that Agamben problematises – “being, it does not matter which…” – and the usage he offers as “exactly the opposite” – “being such that it always matters”, a comma has disappeared. This is not an accident of punctuation or translation. In the following paragraph he develops his ideas about “being such”, and how it can help us to think about identity (which can, as we know, function as much as an exclusionary operation as an inclusive condition):

The Whatever in question here relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property (to a concept, for example: being red\(^7\), being French, being Muslim), but only in its being *such as it is*. Singularity is thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineeability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal. The intelligible, according to a beautiful expression of Levi ben Gershon (Gersonides), is neither a universal nor an individual included in a series, but rather ‘singularity insofar as it is whatever singularity.’ In this conception, such-and-such being is reclaimed from its having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, to this or that class (the reds, the French, the Muslims) – and it is reclaimed not for another class nor for the simple generic absence of any belonging, but for being-*such*, for belonging itself. (1993, pp.1-2)

When we think in terms of being-*such*, in terms of each of us as a singluratity and each of us as a being that matters, it becomes possible “be just as you” are at any given

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\(^6\) In footnote 1, which is to the first use of “whatever” in the first sentence, the translator, Michael Hardt, raises problems in correspondence, resonance and subtlety for English in dealing with the Italian (*qualunque*) and the French (*quelconque*) which have led to varying translations, “as ‘particular’ in some cases and ‘general’ in others”. He emphasises that “as Agamben makes clear...whatever”...refers precisely to that which is neither particular nor general, neither individual nor generic” (1993, p.107). This matters not only for my discussion here, but also for how I make use of examples in Agamben’s sense.

\(^7\) “Red” should be understood as “socialist”, “communist”, “left wing”. 
point in time. This is very helpful in that when we think about the extent to which many circus artists are frequently characterised by their singularities, their differences and their desire to belong without altering those aspects of themselves, they can be understood to have found in circus a space, affinity group, community that enables them to be such.

This way of thinking allows recognition and valuing of absolute difference, so that each person is taken to belong because each person is a being who matters and who is able to belong. It is both a simple and difficult argument, but I was excited to work with it as a means to explain the ways in which circus particularly values difference. Many circus performers express a desire to be accepted and to live just as they are. The practice of contemporary circus and the physical, cultural and social spaces within which it takes place characteristically embrace difference and work with it, developing a culture and something like a spatial energy that allows all kinds of being to be present and all kinds of becoming to occur, unconditionally (with the proviso that the space is collaborative and that therefore emotional, psychological or physical violence is unacceptable). This is obviously a generalisation, and clearly all creative spaces have their moments of tension, dissent, power struggles and inclusionary practices that can function as exclusionary practices. However, in my experience almost all contemporary circus creates a milieu that invites and celebrates idiosyncrasy and eccentricity. This is an important aspect of my discussion.

Audience is of course a crucial component of any performing art. Circus audiences are eclectic in their demographic and vary depending on the space in which the work is presented. The almost contemporary dance style of Brisbane company Circa is almost always performed in theatres, and is often attended by a “high art” crowd. On the other hand, Circus Oz mainly perform their work inside their Big Top tent, drawing a more family orientated demographic to their shows. Then there are festival shows and venues such as The Garden of Unearthly Delights at the Adelaide Fringe Festival or Spiegel tent shows (also mainly presented in festival settings) which again can draw an entirely different audience, one that may be looking for a more vaudevillian or cabaret circus experience. The venue or space affects the experience of the artist which in turn shapes the experience of the spectator. Brisbane circus artist Chelsea McGuffin, as part of various companies, has performed her work in opera houses and major theatres around the world and in many other venues including small tents at tiny festivals. McGuffin says:
I really enjoy performing in tents. I like it a lot more than theatres. Just because it has that sense of circus...that energy. I like performing in the round and a tent can’t really go to black and the lighting is quite particular. Often the crowd comes because they want to have a different experience. (Chelsea McGuffin, Aerialist/Acrobat, Interview, October 2014)

I have followed my interest in how space is organised: how an artform can order or, in the case of circus, dis-order a space and create a somewhat "parallel universe" for its audience, artists or workshop participants. And also, how circus bodies can shift the perspective of space and time. In Space, Time and Perversion Grosz (1995) emphasises the need to re-think bodies, explaining how an understanding of the ways in which bodies, time and space can come together can help us to do that: "If bodies are to be reconceived, not only must their matter and form be rethought, but so too must their environment and spatio-temporal location." (1995, p.84)

In considering the importance of spatiality for contemporary circus, I also consider the idea that anywhere can become a circus space – that circus is transferrable and portable. This dates back to circus’s traditional origin, to travelling circus families constantly relocating their show: all they needed was some land and their tent to create what the public instantly recognised as a circus space. Although contemporary circus is performed in a much wider variety of venues than the Big Top, it is still transient in its spatiality. It is just that “circus space” is now signified by the artists who occupy that space, the apparatus fitted into the ceilings and floor, and the creative energy provided by the artform.

In understanding the significance of spatio-temporality to the circus body, we can contemplate the impact that such a robust physical artform can have on the space it occupies and the social implications of not only the performing bodies within that space, but also the bodies of the audience. Circus bodies are intrinsic to generating a circus space. My observation is that it is the movement of the bodies that “mark” a space as circus. And while apparatus has been and still is a significant part of the artform, companies such as Circa and Gravity and Other Myths, are more minimalistic in their aesthetic and in turn place more emphasis on the bodies of the artists and how they move together through the space.

Survey of literature and resources

My aim in this section is to provide an insight into the range of secondary and primary sources informing this work. In the foregoing discussion of concepts and themes, I have referred to a range of literature that I have drawn on extensively in this project.
Here, I give an overview of sources that have proved important, including some to which I have already referred, but I do not attempt to provide a comprehensive “review” of the literature.

**Australian contemporary circus scholars**

As already noted, the history/development of contemporary circus in Australia is yet to be documented in a detailed scholarly publication, or even a popular or “coffee table” book, and there has been little attention to matters such as practice philosophy, company structures, and engagements with other arts sectors.


Also a noted tertiary lecturer and ex-theatre performer, Rosemary Farrell has documented the history and influence of Chinese acrobatics in Australia which, as I have indicated above, was a turning point in the initial development of contemporary circus. Her work is useful in marking the key figures and moments from this crucial stage in the artform’s history. Chinese trainer Mr Lu is obviously a central figure in Australian contemporary circus, and Farrell’s work explores his contribution in the Nanjing Projects I and II.8

An original member of Circus Oz, Jane Mullet’s PhD, *Circus Alternatives* (2005), investigated the emergence of alternative circus in Australia, Canada and France. She has also written journal articles based on this research, with a focus on circus in Australia in the 1980s. “Australian New Circus in the 1980’s” (2014) includes some documentation of the early days of *Circus Oz* and *Legs On The Wall*, with a focus on political circus acts and spectacle.

Bolton, Farrell and Mullet have histories as influential circus practitioners as well as scholars, so I share with them the position of insider or participant researcher. I recognised that as an insider researcher I should not attempt to convey an “objective”

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8 This also proved useful when I was preparing for my interview with Mr Lu.
position, and consequently that I needed to be confident about writing in my own voice. The modes of expression used by these scholars, particularly Bolton, offered models for writing in the first person about the practice and my relationship to it, without losing the scholarly perspective and voice that are equally important to this project, especially in the light of its emphasis on conceptual and theoretical matters.

Peta Tait’s considerably more theorised work spans a range of performance arts, including various areas of circus. While she does not undertake in-depth study of the Australian contemporary circus industry overall, her work has proved especially beneficial in providing guidance in relation to how I shape my theoretical exploration of circus as an artform, and how I deal with the circus body. Tait has published many journal articles on gender roles in circus, spectacle and the correlations between contemporary circus and theatre, but it is her book, *Circus Bodies: Cultural identity in aerial performance* (2005) that has proved closest to my project. In this work Tait combines a history of aerial performance with theoretical discussion and thematic organisation to discuss the impact of the aerial arts in circus since its inception in the late 1800s. As an aerialist, I found this work particularly valuable in thinking about embodiment and risk in circus. Just as importantly, the book’s structure provided a range of insights into managing a discussion that is both an historical and theoretical exploration of circus performance.

All of these works have been important for my research, but none of them undertakes detailed work on Australian contemporary circus of the kind that I have undertaken in this dissertation. Further, there is precious little in terms of published historical documentation of Australian contemporary circus from a scholarly perspective. My project aims to address these gaps in scholarly analysis of the practice and its development.

*Conceptual strands and the literature*

As will be clear from foregoing discussion, my work has been strongly informed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, especially in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), from which I drew their concepts of rhizomes and rhizomic relations/movements; the Body without Organs; smooth and striated space and various other approaches to thinking through and working with notions of assemblage, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, all of which have played a part in how I conceptualise circus, its practices, and the spaces it inhabits.
I owe much of how I have come to think about space and spatiality to Doreen Massey (2005). Her undoing of previously conventional distinctions between space and place; her emphasis on space as relational; and her ways of working with ideas about space as open, unfinished and replete with potential have been a great help in how I have developed my discussion of circus spaces, and why spatiality matters a great deal for contemporary circus.

Deleuze and Guattari’s use of concepts of chaos and order became important to how I developed my perspectives about creative process in contemporary circus. Elizabeth Grosz’s *Chaos Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (2008) was equally invaluable for my exploration of chaos and order in circus. I also found Grosz's work very helpful to my ways of thinking about bodies, gender and spatiality, and the use of feminist difference theory, for which I drew on *Volatile Bodies* (1994), and *Space, Time and Perversion* (1995).

As well as further enhancing my grasp of how Deleuzian approaches can be deployed in the sites of scholarly and artistic practice, Elspeth Probyn’s *Outside Belongings* (1996) contributed a great deal to my ways of conceptualising identity, belonging and becoming. In dealing with sites and experiences where the personal and social intersect, Probyn provides an especially engaging model of the effective use of an autobiographical voice in scholarly writing, which has influenced me in how I have thought about my own style.

In addition to her very effective use of Deleuze, as already noted Probyn deploys ideas and processes from Giorgio Agamben. This contributed to how I understood my own engagements with Agamben’s work as practical philosophy. In *The Coming Community* (1993) Agamben deals with contemporary developments in identity, belonging, becoming and community. I have drawn on his ways of thinking about difference, singularities and people’s movements within and between communities of choice/relations of affinity. I also make use of Agamben’s discussion of the function of the example in philosophy and language to help me to address the methodological challenges of my work (see Methodology below).

Judith Butler’s influential development of the notion of performativity in the context of feminist difference theory, especially in *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (1990), *Bodies that Matter* (1993), and *Undoing Gender* (2004), has taken on an increasingly significant role in how I think and write about bodies and gender in contemporary circus: the questions of physical, aesthetic and ideological risk;
edginess; trust; and putting one’s body and identity “out there” in circus performance. Peta Tait’s work, as noted above, has also been important in connection with these issues.

Michel Foucault’s foundational work on disciplined bodies and power relations, particularly in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *Of Other Spaces* (1986) provided me with a range of significant points of access for discussion of the apparent tensions/contradictions between the self-discipline and shared discipline of highly trained physical performers who are decidedly not “docile bodies” and the apparent indiscipline, disorder/chaos and deliberate creative disarray of circus performance. Foucault has helped me to think about the radical commitment to artistic freedom that marks contemporary circus as an “alternative” practice and the various arrangements for company management and governance that accompany the development of the artform. I am also indebted to Foucault for his development of ideas in relation to heterotopias, heterotopic processes and difference.

There are many other scholars whose thinking has been helpful – they are acknowledged in citations throughout this dissertation. I mention those I concentrate on in this Introduction by way of providing navigational aids. Each has played a large part in the overall conceptual trajectories informing this project, how I have analysed its outcomes, and how I have written about them. They also speak to each other in various important ways, thus enabling me to maintain a sense of coherence in what could otherwise have become a vast and disparate field of ideas.

**Media archives**

In contrast to the dearth of scholarly works on contemporary Australian circus, there are thousands of newspaper articles and show reviews about the work of Australian contemporary circus artists and companies, dating back to 1977. This has proved to be a very informative, though time consuming, resource. In the interests of time and relevance, I narrowed the scope to key companies (whether major or small but influential), and significant practitioners, for which media resources proved very useful.

Recurring ideas, themes and views were clear in what I accessed. My findings demonstrate that Australian contemporary circus is regarded highly in international settings with consistent four to five star reviews as well as successive programming and tours to the same venues and festivals. Examples of a combination of outstanding national and international accomplishment are shows such as “Tom Tom Crew” (Strut n Fret Production House) touring for seven years; *Briefs: The Second Coming* (Briefs
Factory, Brisbane) touring for over three years; and Cantina (Strut n Fret and Company2, Brisbane) touring for four years. There is no question that such ongoing success demonstrates industry status equivalent to high profile international companies Cirque du Soleil and Les 7 doigts de la main (both based in Montreal). My research into media coverage has repeatedly shown significant critical and audience regard for the work of Australian circus artists and companies (see also discussion of “archives” in the Methodology section below).

Industry archives/resources

One benefit of being a long term industry insider is that organisations, companies and individuals have been generous in sharing their archival resources with me. Some archives are, of course, already public. For example, a very valuable archival resource has been Circus Oz’s Living Archive. An ARC linkage grant project between Circus Oz, RMIT University, the Australian Research Council, La Trobe University, the Australia Council for the Arts and the Victorian Arts Centre Trust (Performing Arts Collection), it produced:

…a living, breathing, work-in-progress video archive built upon the Circus Oz collection of performance documentation, dating back to 1978. You can search for particular acts, shows and people or you can pick a show at random and be surprised! By building a collection of your favourite acts you can make your own ‘best of’ show or highlights package of that performer you have always loved. (Circus Oz website)

A Nordic Design Conference paper on the project describes how the living archive came to fruition after:

…a three year investigation into the design and development of a “living archive for the performing arts.” The live performing arts are an important part of our shared cultural heritage and it is vital that their histories be documented and preserved. (Carlin, Iwan, Miles & Mullet 2013, p.114)

One by-product of the living archive was a gallery exhibition as part of the 2014 Melbourne Festival, entitled Vault: The non-stop performing history of Circus Oz, which I attended in October 2014. This example of an approach to curating a cultural history of Australian contemporary circus influenced my thinking in relation to how I could go about my own mapping.⁹

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⁹ It also provided an insight into the possibilities of museum and gallery exhibitions that could be post-doctoral projects arising from my research.
Another incredibly valuable resource I have utilised is through Northern New South Wales company Carnival Cinema, whose principal, Hamish McCormick, has been filming and documenting contemporary circus work in Australia for the past ten years, creating promotional videos for various companies and full videographic records of performances. This archive has been an invaluable tool in that enabled me to view works that I had not seen in performance and to access videos of work that was not well documented by the companies that produced it.

Montreal research residency

In mid-2015 (June-late July) I undertook an international research residency in Montreal, Quebec. During this time I was researcher in residence at École Nationale de Cirque (which hosts the largest circus library in the world) and Cirque du Soleil Headquarters. The experience was invaluable, enabling me to spend focused time exploring circus-specific literature and resources, and also in exposing my previous and current research to an international network. I made valuable connections with circus scholars and researchers, which contributed a great deal to my capacity to position Australian contemporary circus in relation to the international context. I also had discussions with Erin Manning and Brian Massumi from Concordia University’s SenseLab, which helped to affirm my ideas about circus bodies and bodies in performance.

Methodological literature

Norman Denzin’s *Performance Ethnography* (2003) and *Interpretive Ethnography* (1997) were useful in relation to how I approached my processes in the interview and archival components of my research, and in guiding the elements of my practice that were allied to ethnography and autoethnography. I position myself as a cultural researcher rather than a social scientist, but there is no question that the challenges and problematics that are encountered by sociological ethnographers and autoethnographers share a similar processual terrain with those that confront me in the field. I also engaged with significant works on the role of the “insider” as researcher, particularly Deborah Reed-Danahay’s *Auto/ethnography* (2017). For models of methods in and approaches to cultural history research I found Peter Burke’s *What is Cultural History?* (2004), Simon Gunn’s *History and Cultural Theory* (2006) and Anna

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10 I was humbled to find that my Honours thesis on the use of circus with children with autism is well read in the international sector and held in high regard as a useful resource.
Green’s *Cultural History* (2008) beneficial as a basis for developing my skills and process. (see Methodology below).

**Methodology**

My methodology for examining contemporary circus in Australia is multi-faceted. It draws on literature research, historical and ethnographic techniques, and auto-ethnography due to my position as a professional in the industry. I have mentioned above that I am an insider-researcher with significant experiential and observational knowledge, a well-developed national and international network, and access to a range of public and private archival sources. My interviews with a wide cross-section of key industry players were essential in uncovering the stories of the artists and the artform that in turn revealed key moments in the development of practices and processes.

In terms of history and practice perspectives much of the information necessary to the success of this project exists in the individual and collective memories of industry practitioners. The majority of the stories, standout moments and turning-points in Australian contemporary circus remain unrecorded and are in danger of being lost or forgotten. There has been no intention for this project to amalgamate the interview and archive data into a comprehensive artform history. However, what emerged for industry practitioners as “key” in terms of performance moments, production choices, aesthetic directions, opportunities for training, and international exchange of performance values, has provided many insights about how contemporary circus became a dynamic, sustainable and influential part of the Australian arts industry. My primary resources, including archives and interviews, also provided the basis for case studies of companies and independent artists that in turn enhanced the development and implementation of my conceptual frameworks.

**Challenge, complexity and insider research**

The challenges involved in this project are largely a result of the complexity of the field. It has been necessary to devise effective strategies to achieve sufficient historical insight while maintaining the scope to achieve conceptual depth and breadth. My position in the industry that I am researching affords me a unique perspective, an inside view that gives me advantages, perspectives and contacts that outsider researchers would not have. Access to personal and company archives and to interviewees has been a great deal easier due to my professional relationships with most of the artists.

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11 Although there is clearly the potential for this at a later stage.
and companies that I have researched and written about. However, being a participant researcher can also present a danger of bias due to being too “inside” my own experience of the Australian contemporary circus sector. It has therefore been important that I remain reflexive in relation to my own subjectivity in the site of the research. Reflexivity and the capacity to reflect upon the complex relations involved in my own experience, values, attitudes and processes as artist, director, trainer, researcher and writer has nevertheless also enabled me to utilise my insider position in ways that shed the kinds of light on the work that an outside researcher would be considerably less likely to be able to provide.

In order to understand how to maintain consistent awareness of my personal experience, artistic opinions and professional position in relation to my interview subjects and the field I was researching – how to consciously avoid allowing my insider status to overshadow or influence my research in a biased way – I read widely about auto-ethnographic practices and ethnographic methods. As noted above in the “Survey of literature and resources”, I found Denzin’s and Reed-Danahay’s works useful in informing my approach to my interview subjects as well as to reviews of shows and other work to which I have close industry ties.

Reed-Danahay describes the auto-ethnographic researcher’s position as in-between, complex and transgressive: “One of the main characteristics of an auto-ethnographic perspective is that the auto-ethnographer is a boundary-crosser, and the role can be characterized as that of a dual identity” (Reed-Danahay, 2017, p.3). I see this as a significant asset to processes of cultural analysis of an artform such as contemporary circus due to the fact that the “outside” view of circus provides a vastly different image compared to what an insider knows on the basis of lived experience of the practice. Bolton has referred to the view of the outsider as a view that is “about the Surface of the Circus” (2001) in that the spectators only see what we as artists want them to see, so they can easily miss what is actually going on. This effect is especially strong in circus where much of the excitement of the performance is generated through the creation of an illusion of simplicity despite the highly skilled, often very dangerous nature of artists’ work. Bolton explains it like this:

Think about the Circus and the surfaces. You take an ordinary field. One day it’s grass next day it’s sawdust, and then it’s grass again, it’s gone. Our ‘cathedral’ here is skin-deep, and then it’s the real world outside. What do you see of the performers? You see the surface, you see the leotard, the sequins, the clown’s face-paint, and that’s all. Then, when it’s gone, all you see is the poster, peeling off the wall, it’s just the surface. (Bolton, 2001, keynote, American Youth Circus Organisation Conference)
An insider’s perspective helps me to see what is beyond the surface and show that to the world “outside”. For me personally, as a practitioner and as a scholar, there have been two major goals of this project. The first was to bring about a deeper understanding of the possibilities of the artform by demonstrating some valuable conceptual frameworks through which we can think about it and encouraging the development of other conceptual approaches. Secondly, I was keen to draw attention to the very significant ways in which contemporary circus has contributed to the cultural landscape of Australian performing arts. My insider status has enhanced my capacity to address both of these goals.

In *Ethnography – step by step* Fetterman (1998) explains the position of the insider as “emic”:

> This emic perspective – the insider’s or native’s perspective of reality – is at the heart of most ethnographic research. The insider’s perception of reality is instrumental to understanding and accurately describing situations and behaviours. Native perceptions may not conform to an ‘objective’ reality, but they help the fieldworker understand why members of the social group do what they do. In contrast to *a priori* assumptions about how systems work from a simple, linear, logical perspective – which might be completely off target – ethnography typically takes a phenomenologically orientated research approach. (1998, p.20)

Rather than describing the position of an insider researcher, Fetterman is explaining the importance for *all* ethnographic research of gathering “insider” or “native” knowledge then making sensitive, thoughtful use of it as a means to provide subtle insights in a “phenomenologically oriented research approach”. This, Fetterman argues, helps ethnography avoid traps that can so readily occur in observational research that regards itself as “objective” but in doing so relies on “*a priori* assumptions”. Being myself a “native” of the contemporary circus industry in Australia complicated my research, as I noted above, with potential biases or “rose-coloured glasses”. However, undertaken reflexively, my position as a long-term “native” in Australian contemporary circus definitely provided me with many benefits. Looking back over my research processes, I can see how my grassroots practice experience as a performer and director, my capacity to grasp industry issues due to having occupied various management or leadership roles, and my long-term involvement with ACAPTA, have definitely aided my scholarly work. Of course, even as a “native” of contemporary circus, through the interview processes\(^\text{12}\) for example, I was gathering...

\(^{12}\) And the same risks were evident for the collection, analysis and use of other forms of field research: for example, how I navigated the archives; what choices I made in following particular trails; why I made...
and interpreting a great deal of data from other “natives” whose experiences and perspectives could have been different from my own – and sometimes clearly were. These inescapable problematics increased my recognition of the necessity to exercise particular care as an insider participant researcher, frequently pausing to reflect on my position and my responses to the positions expressed by others. Recalling in the context of research how Deleuze and Guattari (1987) stress that smooth and striated spaces are never completely one or the other, I am confident that my self-construction and my various insider roles have provided me with sufficient capacity to gain deeper insights into the artists and their practices as well as enough understanding to grasp how the industry works, with a relatively high degree of subtlety. I have no doubt that my research has been enriched because it has been conducted in these complex contexts and because I was aware of those complexities. A researcher coming from outside, by contrast, even though she could collect a great deal of information and many perspectives from “natives”, then draw on that data with great sensitivity and care, could still risk looking “over” the industry and thus overlooking elements of it, misinterpreting facets of what is in fact occurring.

Dwight Conquergood (1991) uses notions of performativity in relation to methodologies in the social sciences. He stresses that methodology is a relational process and therefore offers pairs of operations appropriate to deal with social contexts:

...each pair is predicated on the proposition that if the world is a performance, not a text, then today we need a model of social science that is performative. This means that we must rethink the relationships between the elements in each of the … pairs. (1991, p.190)

With another reminder that socio-cultural binaries – in discourse and in action – can never be pure but are always a matter of degrees of interimplication and, indeed, relationality, this approach offered a useful way to consider the performative nature of Australian contemporary circus and how it presents itself to the world. At the same time, it also offered a way of thinking about how, with this thesis, I was endeavouring to open the door to some of the inner workings of the artform and to situate it as a major sector in the arts and a very significant contributor to cultural export.

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case studies of particular companies or artists and not others; who I have chosen to quote in the dissertation and why. No research is ever “objective” in the old empiricist sense of that term.
In *Performing Ethnography* (2003) Denzin escapes the dangers of binaries by drawing on Conquergood’s list to offer five “questions” to be considered in ethnographic work in/with arts based communities:

- Performance and cultural process
- Performance and ethnographic praxis
- Performance and hermeneutics
- Performance and the act of scholarly representation
- Performance and the politics of culture

Denzin observes a similar angle to Conquergood, that, “we cannot study experience directly. We study it through and in its performative representations” (2003, p.12). This succinct statement of the research problematic in the kind of work I was doing encouraged me to think about how I could be alert to the ways in which I was encountering “performative representations” in my research – and particularly in my use of primary materials from archives, reviews and interviews. Denzin’s adaption of Conquergood’s list also presented an interesting analytical opportunity in that I could deploy it in thinking about how “circus performance” intersects with each of the other half of the five pairs. Despite my resistance to schematised methodological approaches that obviously risk over-simplification of complex fields, in relation to archival and interview data, I experimented with this five question method. It opened my data to fresh insights by enabling me to attain some temporary distance from my insider position by de-familiarising my material and my ways of thinking about it. However, as long as I am arguing for the value of difference, singularity, multiplicities, pluralities, complexity and so on, both in contemporary circus and in how we think about it, research methods that run the risk of simplifying complex fields can only ever be supplementary and complementary to analytics that work with complexities.

*Working with history, dealing with histories*

I utilised my reading about methods in cultural history in order to consider aspects of the challenge involved in weaving together my major conceptual strands with a cultural analysis based in aspects of the history of the artform, given that it was not my aim to create a linear history of Australian contemporary circus. As a practitioner and as an emerging cultural theorist, this dissertation is primarily focused on developing ways of conceptualising and theorising in and about contemporary circus. As noted earlier, I engage with major historical landmarks in the development of the artform partly because they help to illustrate when and how the field acquired the forms it currently
takes, but principally because those key moments provide opportunities to explore the emergence of certain performance values, demonstrate the relations between contemporary circus and its socio-cultural and political contexts, and conceptualise those perspectives.

I set out to create a method of research that mirrors the non-linear trajectory of the artform itself, a process or method that reflected its focus. The artform’s history is thus woven through what is primarily an analytical and theoretical discussion. This enables me to keep the argument moving forward in terms of the conceptual interests of the project and its major thematic strands, while at the same time acknowledging and reflecting the rhizomic nature of circus practice and of contemporary circus as a national and international arts industry sector.

Anna Green (2008) notes that, “historical evidence, as well as the historian’s own account of the past, should be understood as representations, rather than reconstructions, of reality” (90). While this statement of what has become a theoretical given might seem to invite a view of history as fundamentally a question of textual rather than “performative representations”, there is no reason why it should not sit well beside a performative approach to research about performance. It serves in that context as a reminder that there are bound to be multiple “histories” available to a researcher such as me, who is remembering and reflecting as an insider, interviewing others, working with archives and conducting literature research.

I stress that having no background in historical training, I had no intention of positioning myself as a historian in undertaking this project. Nevertheless, I am investigating history and basing an important aspect of my fieldwork on collecting the memories and anecdotes of industry participants. Throughout the research process, therefore, I have had to think carefully about my own position in relation to history and historical research methods. Simon Gunn facilitated this by providing an insight into processes of connecting cultural theory with historical analysis. In History and Cultural Theory (2006) he suggests that, “cultural analysis is not a matter of causal explanation or scientific proof, but of increasing levels of precision in the interpretation and understanding of human events” (60). Earlier he remarks, “the concept of culture stands at the centre of the relationship between new kinds of theory and new kinds of history” (54). This offered me a means of thinking about process that supported my conceptual study of circus history, in my intertwining of conceptual and thematic strands drawn from cultural theory with key historical moments, to map the artform temporarily as well as spatially and in terms of embodiment.
Using archives

Archival records are the most obviously “historical” resource drawn on in my research. It is important to bear in mind Green’s observation about the representational nature of “evidence” of this kind, which provided me with a valuable insight into how I could interpret it. Archival resources provide a valuable record of what happened and when, but they also provide a particularly significant insight into how the artform has represented itself over time. Materials like posters, advertisements and programs reflect certain values and aesthetics, while feature articles and reviews allow insights regarding how the work commented on the socio-cultural and political climate of its time, and how it was received in that context.

I accessed archives related to key companies through State libraries, the National Library of Australia, the libraries’ websites, such as the NLA’s Trove, and general search engines. Due to my long-term professional presence and widespread connections in the sector, I have also been given access to certain company and private archives. The companies I made a point of tracking through such archival work include: Circus Oz (Melbourne), Flying Fruit Flies (Albury/Wodonga), Flipside Circus (Brisbane), Circa (Brisbane), Rock n Roll Circus (Brisbane), Legs on the Wall (Sydney), Briefs Factory (Brisbane), Vulcana Women’s Circus (Brisbane), Melbourne Women’s Circus, Company2 (Brisbane), Strut n Fret Production House (Melbourne/Brisbane), and Gravity and Other Myths (Adelaide). I was also provided with access to the broad collection and company archives of Carnival Cinema, consisting of promotional footage, photo documentation of shows and behind the scenes short documentaries on creative processes of some of the key companies. As mentioned in the survey of literature and resources, this material has been invaluable in recalling key performances and accessing those that I have been unable to witness live.

My identification of important moments or turning points, key companies and influential productions, and my analysis of media and cultural perceptions, between them provide documentary perspectives to sit alongside anecdotal research from my interview subjects. Neither of these resources should be regarded as more or less reliable than the other. My archival work has allowed me to visit and revisit Australian contemporary circus companies and personnel across time and geographies, providing glimpses into the background to the Australian sector’s global significance in the current period. The archives also highlight how certain productions and the sites in which they took place have proved to be transformative and formative: the sometimes surprising relations
between classical/traditional and contemporary circus; the intersections between theatre, dance and circus; the growing importance of festivals and so on.

I have collated newspaper articles and show reviews relating to the work of Australian circus artists and companies, to investigate how that work was received/perceived by the artistic community, critics and the public. This collation has allowed me to look further into what was happening socially and politically at the time the work was being produced. A particularly useful outcome of these parallel readings of newspaper articles and reviews has been that the insights that journalistic coverage allows regarding how the artists expected the work to be received, or believed it was being perceived, can be compared to what the reviews reveal about media and audience perceptions. Such comparative work has been possible not only in relation to particular shows or acts, but also in relation to the development of the artform as whole.

Reviews of Australian contemporary circus consistently feature descriptions of highly skilled works with a casual or nonchalant veneer:

To say I was completely blown away by 'Briefs: The Second Coming' would be an understatement. Between extreme feats of flexibility, saucy striptease, bedazzled costumes emblazoned with the Australian flag and one eye-popping yo-yo routine, it was a performance that most audience members will not be able to erase from their memories in a hurry. ([The West Australian](http://www.thewest.com.au), review of “Briefs the Second Coming”, Briefs Factory, February 2015)

But their air of insouciance completely belies their consummate skills. ([Edinburgh Guide](http://www.edinburghguide.com), review of “Scotch and Soda”, Company2, November 2014)

*Circus Oz*, now in its 26th year, is proud to be distinctly Australian in a world of increasingly globalised culture. The multi-skilled ensemble of men and women present an exuberant performance, swinging between the sublime and the ridiculous. ([The Cairns Post](http://www.cairnspost.com.au), review of *Circus Oz*, March 2005).

Another frequently highlighted aspect of Australian contemporary circus is an emphasis on gender equality:

It is however a firm rule of Australian circus that gender counts for nothing, and there are some nice plays on this – McGuffin taking base in doubles trapeze, then getting her own back on the men flinging her about in a punch line bow. ([The List](http://www.thelist.co.uk), Edinburgh, review of “Scotch and Soda”, Company2, November 2014).

Similar responses, stressing the skilled informality, edginess, and overtly political/ideological preoccupations, are consistent across the scope of print and on-
line media reviews of the work of Australian contemporary circus artists as a whole. I deal with these characteristics and their representations more fully at various points in this dissertation.

**Interviews**

I conducted seventeen interviews gathering historical anecdotes from the various periods and companies in the developmental trajectory of the artform, as well as perspectives on the current situation. Due to the sparse formal documentation of the form, the interviews have been crucial to filling out the historical story, as it were, but more importantly in understanding of the artform’s impact culturally. Despite my own years in the industry, as a result of these interviews I have developed a far richer appreciation of how contemporary circus developed and continues to build links and grow, despite the ever-changing climate of arts funding in Australia.

The interviews were conducted at various points throughout the whole research process because they were more often than not contingent on the touring schedules of artists and companies, our mutual presence at particular festivals or conferences, and so on. Even so, I am confident that the sample captures most of the key players in the past and present of contemporary circus in Australia who are still alive. The interviewees cover a wide cross-section of the current sector: people in independent small companies and in large to medium-scale companies; freelance artists; youth circus practitioners; artistic directors/choreographers; and master circus trainers. All are people who have made extensive contributions to the sector and they intersect with each other in various ways.

While, as already mentioned, much of the history of the artform has not been documented, it nevertheless exists in the anecdotes of practitioners. This underscores the importance of the interviews as an element of this project and the outcomes, as expected, proved extremely beneficial historically. More importantly, though, the interview data reinforced the appropriateness of the conceptual strands that I developed on the basis of my broader research and my existing knowledge of the sector, and the usefulness of the theoretical terrains that informed them. That is, even though the great majority of the people I interviewed are not at all familiar with those terrains, it was frequently the case that their ways of conceptualising the artform, the industry’s development, its current forms and its performance values sat very comfortably with my scholarly frameworks.
From early in this aspect of my fieldwork, recurring themes and ideas began to emerge, in one interview after another, echoing those I had already identified. I am confident that I have not prompted or elicited those themes. Rather, they are in fact central to how industry personnel understand the sector. Interviewees returned regularly to the notions of spatiality, risk taking, representations of the body and time. Just as the interviews are drawn on in various ways throughout this dissertation, supporting and connecting my conceptual strands with key historical moments and archival work, these recurrent themes transect each chapter, playing out from various perspectives depending on the focus of that chapter. I have resisted splitting the dissertation into thematically defined sections in the interests of establishing coherence between the various elements of my method and my discussion of its outcomes in relation to the research questions. Instead, my discussion is driven by the developing argument, which in turn arises from the "lines of flight" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) that occurred for me as a practitioner, researcher and theorist. The writing thus visits and revisits certain concepts themes, processes and theoretical insights from different perspectives for different purposes, drawing on my ethnographic and auto-ethnographic data as appropriate for each "plateau" of the work.

"The Example": managing complexity

My research in the literature, as stressed earlier, has been primarily focused on identifying and refining appropriate conceptual frameworks and theoretical terrains to support the discussion and address the research questions. At various points in this Introduction and especially in relation to Methodology, I have referred to the relations between theory, practice and method; the reflexive and reflective relations between them in a project such as this; and the inevitable and necessary complexities of those relations. This can be taken to provide the link to the following discussion, which focuses in some depth on how some of my key concepts intersect with "the example", in Agamben’s usage, to assist me in addressing those complexities.

Transcribing an interview with Brisbane circus artist Chelsea McGuffin highlighted for me the challenge of mapping an artform that is rhizomic in artistic process but also in its growth historically. McGuffin’s work spans multiple companies, multiple genres and facets within the industry, and she is just one artist in the overall picture. This led me to explore ways of encompassing a broad study of the industry in a detailed but manageable manner that aligned with my conceptual strands and theoretical interests. Agamben’s (1993) exploration of the function of the example in thought and language provides an appropriate means to manage the complexities of the sector, and the
research I have done in it and about it, in ways that are consistent with the methods and concepts I am drawing on.

Agamben observes that the example is “one concept that escapes the antinomy of the universal and the particular”:

In any context where it exerts its force, the example is characterized by the fact that it holds for all cases of the same type, and, at the same time, it is included among these. It is one singularity among others, which, however, stands for each of them and serves for all. On one hand, every example is treated in effect as a real particular case; but on the other, it remains understood that it cannot serve in its particularity. Neither particular nor universal, the example is a singular object that presents itself as such, that shows its singularity. (1993, pp.9-10)

These recognitions guided me in my decision to undertake a theoretical and conceptual discussion of the broad reach of the artform and the artists who operate within it, giving examples of genres/styles and historical events, and drawing on examples from the literature, from the archives, from the interviews, as appropriate. This allows considerably more scope for a developed argument than taking a chronological approach; providing a coverage based on a list of major companies and their contributions; or organising the dissertation in terms of thematic sections.

The example in Agamben’s conception offers opportunities to make connections with between community, identity and belonging within the circus industry. It enables me to reflect carefully and deeply on the fact that as members of the circus community we can “fit in without blending in”; we can belong regardless, without compromising our individuality.

As an insider researcher, from my position as a circus artist, I have considered how the artistic and technical elements of circus – how we create work and how we train bodies – intersect with the ways in which I might analyse the artform. I have made a strategic choice to utilise elements of the artistic methods of contemporary circus in shaping this scholarly project, its methods, its analytics and, most importantly, the conceptual and theoretical connections and insights that have arisen. This strategy is discussed wherever relevant in the dissertation.

Circus is a diverse community and it could be said that its diversity accounts at least in part for its “universal” appeal. Universality, however, is one half of the binary that is undone by Agamben’s usage of the example. The other half is particularity. Remembering that for Agamben the example is “a singular object” – “neither particular
nor universal” – if we take up that position in relation to cultural production, we can notice that to stand aside from the familiar urge to utopian claims about the universal import or the uniqueness of certain artforms or works of art is to think beyond ready assumptions and classifications. There is much to be gained from a consideration of circus through Agamben’s ways of working with difference, and, as I discuss elsewhere, his ideas about “the coming community”.

It is an often remarked but rarely theorised aspect of both classical/traditional and contemporary circus that circus artists are frequently idiosyncratic fringe dwellers, eccentrics and nomads. As a form, though, circus requires very high levels of skilled, collaborative engagement with others in the creative enterprise. Thus, circus becomes a community of different people who tend to view the world differently and who in turn push their audiences to see their worlds differently. I argue that Australian contemporary circus has provided and continues to provide a particularly amenable context for such people, and that this to a significant extent underpins its strength.

Through this work I hope to invite industry practitioners and scholars to move beyond discussion of Australian contemporary circus only as a leading performing art that occupies an increasingly important segment of the national and international arts industry and an increasingly important place on the festival circuit. Those recognitions are crucial. But scholarly work must also unpack the conceptual and theoretical positions, implications and potentials of contemporary circus. Similarly, it is time for practitioners in the contemporary circus sector to think beyond its industry position and artistic frameworks in order to recognise the conceptual and theoretical terrains they have brought into being; to see their artform from a more developed perspective. In other words, just as writing, music, visual arts, film, theatre and dance have long been the focus of scholarly attention, and have incorporated conceptual frameworks and theoretical insights into the training of practitioners, cultural managers and critics, contemporary circus has also established itself as a mature artform deserving of the same highly informed attention in scholarship and practice.

The latter provides the rationale for my refusal of theory/practice binaries, or any other discursive practices that resist or deny the complexity and sophistication of the field. In dealing with theoretical complexity and creative complexity in one and the same ground we need ways of thinking that enable us to work with singularities, differences, fluidity and the rapid transformations that are produced by interdisciplinary and transectoral engagements, and which are characteristic of contemporary circus. As researchers we need to be comfortable with analyses that do not lead to simplified or
generalised conclusions or reduce the field to platitudes about universality or uniqueness. Agamben offers a way of thinking and working that acknowledges the productive dynamics of difference and the methodological validity of the example. He offers us the creative potential of what might happen when “singular objects” come together to work together.

It will already be clear that I have found Deleuze and Guattari equally helpful in bringing some of these complex interactions between theory, practice and method into productive arrangements. In Deleuze and Research Methodologies (2013) Rebecca Coleman and Jessica Ringrose refer to Deleuze’s nomadology and nomadic thinking in terms of his notion of “becoming”:

…nomadic thinking is a way of attending to what Deleuze calls ‘molecular becoming’. This concept is intended to highlight that becoming is about the in-between, the middle. It is an explicit attempt by Deleuze to disrupt boundaries; the binary oppositions (between subjects/object, man/woman, black/white and so on) that have governed Western philosophy. (2013:15)

Acknowledging that the history or journey of any artform is just that, a “becoming”, this insight has been helpful in guiding my process of weaving concepts and data together. I set out to dissolve the binary of art and intellect, practice and theory, recognising that the field of circus research is still relatively small and is still finding its feet in the academic milieu. This thesis aims to connect artistic process and theoretical terrains just as trapeze artists connect their bodies to their apparatus. I set out to approach the research “from the middle” in terms finding a balance between my position as artist and my more recent position as emerging scholar. Coleman and Ringrose offer further insight into this:

…becoming is not a process that begins from one point and ends up at another. Becoming is not a process of transforming from one thing into another; ‘a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination… A line of becoming only has a middle (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.293). The methodological task is thus to enter the middle, the between; to relate. (Coleman and Ringrose, 2013, p.19)

Recognising that my position as practitioner-scholar is at once marked by a becoming and an “in-betweeness”, I set out to utilise my methodological choices in ways that enable me to operate in-between, so that my methods support a “becoming”, rather than running the risk of putting obstacles in the way as some more conventional methods could do. As an insider researcher – as an artist first and then a researcher – I recognise strongly that the urge to simplify/de-complexify fields through
synthesising differences leads to preventing emergences that occur in the middle, the
in-between. After all, the creative process of contemporary circus relies precisely on
making spaces that encourage emergences and recognising them when they occur.
Such emergences may indeed be “singular objects”, but as such they are examples of
what is becoming possible. Paralleling the creative processes of contemporary circus,
the creation of new forms and new modes of expression, which in turn gives rise to
new genres and new ideological conjunctions, my methodological and scholarly
processes aim to retain a flexibility and fluidity that reflects the artform of circus itself.

To this end the following chapters cover aspects of the fluidity and dynamics of the
artform in terms of its development and contemporary expressions. Chapter One,
“Lines of flight and layers of becoming”, uncovers the developmental trajectory of
Australian contemporary circus, mapping its emergence from radical theatre origins to
the New Circus movement, and investigating how the artform has shifted and produced
various sub-genres during its forty-year history. Chapter Two, “Networks, hubs and
rhizomes”, explores how spatiality continues to influence not only the sector’s
geographical locations, but also its creative processes, aesthetics and networks.
Further, this chapter maps the historical and current significance of key contemporary
circus cities in which the majority of work is created and showcased, as well as key
festivals that consistently program Australian work.

Recognising that the body is the central focus of the artform, Chapter Three, “The
legacy of the Nanjing Project”, concentrates on the training of Australian circus bodies
and the ongoing influence on the national sector of Chinese classical circus training
methods. As its title indicates, Chapter Four, “Women in Australian Circus”, stresses
the contributions of women to the sector, including the rise of the Women’s Circus
movement in the early 1990s; the influence of feminist ideologies on the development,
management and performance values of key companies such as Circus Oz, Club
Swing and Acrobat; and a worrying recent trend towards considerably lower
representation of women on stage in the major touring companies. Continuing the
focus on bodies, Chapter Five, “A Rhythm of Bodies”, considers the role that circus
plays in “un-doing gender” (Butler 2004) through a number of case studies, beginning
with Brisbane-based company Briefs Factory. The exploration of bodies and creativity
is built upon through a discussion that highlights the importance of embodiment in
ensemble work, focussing on the work of Adelaide collective, Gravity and Other Myths.
Finally, Chapter Five demonstrates how sideshow bodies provide the potential for us
to think beyond the limitations of what a body can do.
With independent companies often dominating both the national and international performing arts tour circuits, Chapter Six, “Towards new ways of working”, describes how alternative Australian company models are challenging the more traditional structures of larger, government-funded Australian arts organisations, using the examples of Rock n Roll Circus, Acrobat, Briefs Factory and Strut n Fret Production House. Chapter Seven, “Making multiplicities”, brings together concepts of creative chaos, order, structure and flow to illustrate how multiplicity and inclusivity, in conjunction with experiences of in-betweeness, have shaped the collective identity of the Australian artform. I argue that these qualities need to be recognised as central to what Australian contemporary circus is and might become.
Chapter One: Lines of flight and layers of becoming

Mapping the trajectory of the artform

In Chapter One, I introduce the key companies and practitioners that have shaped the history and development of contemporary circus in Australia in order to provide a map that allows insight into how the rhizomic nature of the artform has unfolded. For Deleuze and Guattari, mapping, or the “Principle of cartography and decalcomania” (1987, p.12), is an aspect of rhizomics. To map is not to represent something in order to “pin it down”, rather it is to produce an abstraction that is open to interpretation, reconnections, disconnections, change and movement.

For Deleuze and Guattari (1987, Pp.12-25) much of Western thought has for too long been characterised by “arborescent” approaches to thinking, which they also call “tree logic”. “It is odd”, they remark, “how the tree has dominated Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy, but also gnosiology, theology, ontology, all of philosophy…: the root-foundation, Grund, racine, fondement” (1987, p.18). This thought-system relies on “root and branch” representations – familiar in powerful discursive mechanisms such as “the Tree of Life”, “the Tree of Man”, “the family tree”, but equally familiar in any flow chart of boxes or circles connected with lines that begin with a point of origin or a field of origin and connect from one point to the next temporally or spatially, or both, to arrive at a “now” or a “here” or a “solution” or a “systematic process”. We need to notice that in the interests of managing highly complex fields in “accessible” and/or “systematic” and/or “manageable” ways, all of these tree logics work by excluding what is apparently not part of the “picture” and including what is left. It is a process of “exclusive disjunction” that rests on a binary logic, no matter how complex the “tree” or “chart” might become. While such thinking has clearly had its very important uses and outcomes in Western knowledge, it is also limited:

…a rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model. It is a stranger to any idea of genetic axis or deep structure. A genetic axis is like an objective pivotal unity upon which successive stages are organised; a deep structure is more like a base sequence that can be broken down into immediate constituents, while the unity of the product passes into another, transformational and subjective dimension. This does not constitute a departure from the representative model of the tree, or root – pivotal taproot or fascicles… All of tree logic is a logic of tracing and reproduction. (1987, p.12)
By contrast, drawing on their famous example of relations-between the wasp and the orchid, they continue:

The rhizome is altogether different, a map and not a tracing. Make a map and not a tracing. The orchid does not reproduce the tracing of the wasp; if forms a map with the wasp, in a rhizome. What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in on itself; it constructs the unconscious. It fosters connections between fields... (1987, p.12; emphasis in original)

In this conception (which predates the even more obviously fluid nature of virtual applications such as Google Maps), the map

...is itself a part of the rhizome. The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation. Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways...as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back ‘to the same’. (1987, p.12)

I have quoted at length here because in the course of this dissertation I draw on these ideas often, and at the same time I am enacting them. Deleuze and Guattari’s understandings about mapping and rhizomics strongly coincide with how I experienced and thought about my encounters with anecdotal and archival stories about the development of contemporary circus in Australia. Equally, they sit comfortably with my own lengthy engagement in the sector as a professional. Further, I have made use of concepts, ideas, theory, themes and a structure for the dissertation that provide “multiple entryways”. I have drawn attention to the extent to which this artform operates rhizomically, and how it demonstrates its openness to multiple connections within itself and with other artforms or contexts for art making.

Typically, Deleuze and Guattari problematise their own thinking, and in this case they ask:

Have we not, however, reverted to a simple dualism by contrasting maps to tracings, as good and bad sides? Is it not of the essence of the map to traceable? Is it not of the essence of the rhizome to intersect roots and sometimes merge with them? Does not a map contain phenomena of redundancy that are already like tracings of its own? Does not a multiplicity have strata upon with unifications and totalizations, massification, mimetic mechanisms, signifying power takeovers, and subjective attributions take root> Do not even lines of flight, due to their eventual divergence, reproduce the very formations their function it was to dismantle or outflank?
But the opposite is also true. It is question of method: *the tracing should always be put back on the map.* (1987, p.13)

I have been very concerned with this particular “question of method”. For each interview I undertook and transcribed, each archival source I accessed and positioned in relation to the rest of the emerging “picture” of the development of the artform, I was encountering what might be thought of as the tracings of other people’s mapping of particular temporally and spatially situated events – whether those events were shows, changes in company structures, personal frictions or the formation of important partnerships. Thus, the mapping that I present in this part of the dissertation, could only ever be the outcome of the interactions and reflections between earlier maps, the tracings of those in the current maps, and the choices I made about how I would navigate the map that I produced out of all of that. I did consciously try to put the tracings back on the maps. The outcome of that conscious process has been at least to believe that I have largely avoided the pitfalls of making a map of the sector that suits my conception of it, even in terms of my “Deleuzian” conception, but omits the understandings and perceptions of others.

Reg Bolton observed:

> The history and actuality of Circus is a model of Multi-Culturalism and Co-existence. It is a universal art form with an ancient and diverse pedigree. To study its history and contemporary development is to see the world in microcosm, its variety, its challenges, and its ever-changing view of itself. (1999, p.14)

In this he uses some terms I would not use (e.g. “universal”) and representations I would avoid “ancient …pedigree”, but he also captures exactly what it seems matters most to any exploration of the artform – its diversity, its collaborative practices, its variety, and especially, “its ever-changing view of itself”. These qualities, remarked on again and again by my participants and my research sources, are the same qualities that have enabled me to undertake a mapping that remains open, while at the same time putting the tracings back on the map. What emerges from this is a kind of “history”, but it is much more importantly a narrative, a story. It is the product of multiple voices, including my own voice. I can’t separate these from each other, nor should I.
From radical theatre to the New Circus

Some forty years ago in the midst of a thriving radical theatre and street theatre culture, two independent companies\(^{13}\) would come together and cement what is now identified by many as the “starting point” for contemporary circus in Australia. *New Ensemble Circus* (Adelaide) and *Soapbox Circus* (Melbourne) joined forces in 1977 to form *Circus Oz*. Prior to merging to form *Circus Oz*, both *New Circus Ensemble* and *Soapbox Circus* were consistently using circus skills within their work. Their shows contained classical circus techniques of acrobatics and clowning and so on, skills that were predominantly self-taught at that stage in the artform’s history (see Chapter Three). Circus skills were combined with theatre and street theatre methods and elements of cabaret styles in performance were also evident in the work of both companies. It is interesting to consider that by using the word “circus” in their company names, both collectives were purposefully identifying their style of work as circus and not theatre, despite their theatre based beginnings.

Founding member of *Circus Oz*, Jono Hawkes documented this starting point in his contribution to *The Companion to Theatre in Australia* (1995):

*Circus Oz* was founded upon ideas that informed new Australian theatre in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s – development of an Australian voice, ensemble playing and group creativity, heightened and exuberant physicality, exploration of comedy, populism, focus on the performer and stands on political issues. Two groups amalgamated to form *Circus Oz* in December 1977. One was *Soapbox Circus*, a roadshow set up by the Australian Performing Group in 1976. The other was the *New Ensemble Circus*, a continuation of the *New Circus* established in Adelaide in 1974. (p.145)

Here we need to recall Deleuze and Guattari on the matter of origins, noting that this “starting point” is in fact several, and that already we have two “circuses” involved, and already we also have theatrical practices and values being drawn upon that had been produced in other contexts. Thus, the “starting point” should not be considered an “origin” and certainly not any kind of “unity” but rather, a change, a moment within a series of transformations already taking place, and a reassembling of personnel, company structures, techniques and values.

At the time the two companies merged, the classical/traditional family circus shows around Australia were thriving and touring consistently, and while links to these

\(^{13}\) Throughout this thesis, “independent company” and “independent artist” refer to circus companies or individuals who do not rely on ongoing government funding for their sustainability.
classical family circus shows are discernible in Circus Oz, it was also the case that a hybrid version of circus, referred to as “New Circus”, was emerging around the world. In these “new” shows animals were no longer used and radical theatre influences were very evident. Circus Oz saw an opportunity to create a new form that could at the same time represent a national identity of circus as a performing art. Sue Broadway describes this idea of a national identity in “Circus Oz: the first seven years”:

We believed that if there were to be national opera, music, dance and theatre companies, then there should also be a national circus. We looked to the role models of China and Russia, where circuses and acrobatic troupes were supported by the state and drew their talent from fully- resourced training schools. With this ambition in mind we incorporated the company as Circus Australia Ltd. And for reasons of brevity and marketability, dubbed the show “Circus Oz”. (1999, p.173)

The choice to take the less formal moniker of Circus Oz as their trade name demonstrates how they branded themselves from the outset as working with an idea of an “Aussie” identity. That identity became synonymous with the notion of the larrikin\textsuperscript{14}. Brash, openly opinionated and with the ability to poke fun at themselves, Circus Oz became renowned not only as leaders in the New Circus genre, but also for delivering work that was as highly comical as it was political. As Peta Tait observes:

\textit{Circus Oz} has also carved out a unique reputation in the national and international arena for comic circus acts delivered as satire. The company was formed out of the radicalism of anti-establishment values in the late 1970’s and, while the political rhetoric became comparatively tempered in the 1990’s, the ongoing commentary on establishment values remains a core part of its artistic approach. This is circus that concurs with left-wing politics and attracts practitioners for that reason. (2004, p.76)

Soon after Circus Oz was formed, The Flying Fruit Fly Circus (FFFC) was established in Albury Wodonga, a regional city formed in the first half of the 1970s out of twin country towns that straddle the border of New South Wales and Victoria. The Albury Wodonga city-building initiative was part of the Whitlam Federal Labor government’s regional development and decentralisation strategy. The latter meant that funding flowed to the region for community projects and cultural development, and continued to do so under at least two subsequent governments. Given that 1979 was deemed “The International Year of the Child”, Albury Wodonga’s theatre hub, the Murray River Performing Group (MRPG) introduced a children’s summer holiday program featuring

\textsuperscript{14} Larrikin as a particularly Australian term apparently emerged in Melbourne in the late 1860s, although it also has antecedents in Britain (OED). In Australian English it refers to a character or person who is loud, brash and often shows a disregard for social and political convention.
circus as part of the line-up. Over 80 school-aged children attended the program over a six week period, at the end of which a show was produced. The show was entitled “The Flying Fruit Fly Circus”\textsuperscript{15}. It was so successful that it became the foundation for what we now know as Australia’s longest running and arguably most famous youth circus company.

The FFFC would go on to become a key connector for the rapidly growing New Circus/contemporary circus sector not only in its capacity to train future performers, but also in its dedicated national training projects and international partnerships that furthered not only youth circus in Australia, but the entire contemporary circus sector. I discuss the journey of the FFFC in more detail in Chapter Two in relation to their influence on the national youth circus sector and the impact of the FFFC training spaces in creating hubs of creativity and networks for the wider sector.

\textit{International cross-cultural collaborations}

Late 1983 brought another pivotal moment in the development of contemporary circus in Australia, with the arrival in Albury Wodonga of a team of Chinese circus artists to facilitate what became the first Nanjing Project. In the Nanjing Project members of FFFC, Circus Oz and a mix of independent practitioners from around the country came together to gain professional development and skill training in Chinese circus techniques. The project was made possible through combined funding from the federal government and private sponsorship and was so successful that the troupe returned to Albury Wodonga in 1986 for Nanjing Project II.\textsuperscript{16}

One of the key artists working on the Nanjing Projects Guang Rong Lu, or “Mr Lu” as he has been known in Australia for a long time, became a cornerstone of contemporary circus in Australia. He stayed on after the second Nanjing Project to become Master Trainer at the FFFC where he assisted in establishing the company as the foremost youth circus school in Australia. Under the leadership of Mr Lu the FFFC became celebrated for its impeccable skill training whereby the addition of Chinese methods

\textsuperscript{15} By 1979 “New Circus” was already familiar in the progressive sector of Australian arts culture. However, popular cultural references were probably particularly significant in the naming of “The Flying Fruit Fly Circus”. Albury Wodonga is a major regional centre for extremely large-scale fruit growing, irrigated by the Murray River, and in many parts of Australia the worst pest for the fruit industry is the tiny but devastating fruit fly. Further, it is hard not to hear in the name redolences of Monty Python’s Flying Circus, which was first broadcast on British and Australian television 1969-1974, had quickly become what is now called a “cult classic”, and was still being repeated frequently by ABC Television when the youth circus show was named.

\textsuperscript{16} See Chapter Three for detailed discussion of how the Nanjing project came about, and which key players were instrumental in making it happen.
and apparatuses saw the young artists become highly skilled and extremely diverse in their circus repertoire. Mr Lu went on to be the unofficial “Master Trainer” for the entire sector: companies from all over the country would travel to FFFC to polish their skill set drawing on his expertise. After close to 15 years at FFFC Mr Lu became the inaugural Head Trainer at the National Institute of Circus Arts in Melbourne where he is still shaping the skills and artistic training of emerging circus professionals. Being a major influence and key practitioner in the Australian contemporary circus sector throughout most of its history and a performing artist in the Chinese Circus milieu prior to that, Mr Lu witnessed the arrival of contemporary circus as a genre internationally. (See Chapter Three for detailed discussion of the impact on the sector of the Chinese training method and of Mr Lu personally.)

In an interview I conducted with him in late 2015, Mr Lu described how the arrival of contemporary circus coincided with an ideological shift in culture on many platforms:

So over 30 years ago the political climate was influencing this ideological change and a push for a cultural change, women’s liberation and animal freedom, the war stopped, student revolution was occurring. By that time in the early 70’s universities were very heavily and actively involved in the political movement, and that was reflected in film, in music, in art, in theatre and then it was also reflected in the circus – how to present it. So from where we are now you can clearly see how contemporary circus emerged in that climate and why, but back then it wasn’t so obvious, although certainly there was the force of it coming through and shifting things. (Mr Lu, Interview: November 2015)

Reflecting on the first seven years of Circus Oz, Sue Broadway expressed similar sentiments in terms of the shift that occurred within the artform and the ideological shift in the culture that made it possible: “It is difficult to imagine from today’s perspective how unusual and exciting the emergence of contemporary circus seemed – how unlike anything we had ever seen, how radical, how promising” (1999, p.172).

Contemporary circus in Australia has grown in what can only be called an exponential way since those early days of the late 1970s and early 1980s. I mentioned in the Introduction that contemporary circus as an artform contains many layers, styles, sub-genres. It might be thought of as having genres within the genre. Discussions among industry peers concerning how contemporary circus has developed to acquire its current form/s and characteristics often centre around three main “waves” that have created “new genres” in the Australian circus milieu. I return to these “three waves” in the next subsection. For now, as with my earlier point about Circus Oz having several “starting points” none of which can be thought of as an “origin”, I want to draw attention
to how we might think about movements of change, basing my discussion in Deleuze and Guattari.

*A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) of course, works with many concepts and develops more than a thousand ideas, but centrally it is concerned with using an idea of rhizomic movements in order to consider how things change; how they connect and disconnect, assemble and disassemble; and how understanding things in terms of binaries – either/or statements – will never enable us to address these questions. The key insight is that we in the West could think differently, given that how we have been in the habit of thinking has not brought us to productive relations with each other or with the Earth. That different thinking lies in the formulation of the rhizome, and…and…and…, replacing either/or. The upshot of this is clearly to complexify the field of thought (our other logics tend towards simplifications). Hence they give us *A Thousand Plateaus*, which expresses a similar set of ideas in many different ways, using different terms and from different perspectives towards different ends. Within it readers tend to grasp certain descriptions or explanations that work to help us understand what we are trying to understand about thinking.\(^\text{17}\).

In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari provide what have become several very well-known "summary" descriptions of what distinguishes a rhizome from other forms of growth or organisation, which different people find useful in different ways. One begins with:

> Let us summarize the principal characteristics of a rhizome: unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four five, etc. It is not a multiple derived from the One, or to which One is added (n+1). It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overspills. (1987, p.21; emphasis in original)

Here, it is their usage of *milieu* on which I want to focus. It does not carry an idea of a broad field with certain shared characteristics, as in the usage apparently implied by

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\(^{17}\) This is what I have done in this thesis. In choosing particular ideas in such a way, I want to stress that Deleuze and Guattari never wanted to be positioned as “theorists” who present a settled set of ideas through which we might understand a problem, or the world. This they called “the condition of interpretosis” because it involves in a sense throwing a preexisting “tracing” over what exists, and seeing, therefore, what it allows you to see. I tend to think they were instead providing many different tools or processes to think with and through.
“circus milieu”, but instead it refers very precisely to the “middle” of things from which the rest of a rhizome generates. It is also used with the understanding that there is no necessity of shared traits once such a process is underway. Actually, though, when I consider what I have understood about the development and current state of play in contemporary circus in Australia, drawing on the memories, reflections and observations of others as well as on my own, the sense of a milieu as a richly generative “middle” from which all sorts of other styles and genre expressions spread, break off, reconnect, reassemble and so on, seems exactly right.

The second summary description of a rhizome that I find particularly appropriate to this discussion is much more concise: “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo” (1987, p. 25; emphasis in original). And my third choice qualifies the second, and to some extent captures the radical implications of the other two:

The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed.18 Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle. (1987, p.25; emphasis in original)

When I think of Australian contemporary circus with these in mind, I am obviously not thinking of something that has taken a linear path or reached a particular state that can be “defined” in particular ways. I am thinking of the form always being intermezzo, in-between all the things it has been and all the things it is going to be. Thus I refer to “states of becoming” of Australian contemporary circus. While my participants may name their recognitions and insights in other ways, I have no doubt whatsoever that they and other industry commentators, perceive contemporary circus as a perpetually shifting artform that responds not only to the socio-political agendas of its time but also to the spaces it occupies (see Chapter Two) and the people who make it happen. That there are currently strong markers of changing aesthetics in the artform here in Australia and also internationally should therefore surprise none of us.

**States of becoming in Australian contemporary circus**

I want to return now to the past and to the “three waves” to which industry people refer as having influenced the development of contemporary circus in Australia, bearing in

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18 For Deleuze and Guattari “speed” strongly aligns with “intensity”, and refers to “momentum” more than “acceleration”.
mind that I am positioning them as changes in motion, states of becoming, which behave rhizomically.

The first “wave” was the continuing existence of classical/traditional family circus, which started around 1880 and is still operating in Australia and around the globe. It is very important to notice that this form of circus has not itself remained static in the period that can be taken to mark the emergence and growth of contemporary circus, nor has it remained separate from other developments in the artform. Classical/traditional circus has changed in many ways, and continues to do so. This is most obviously the case in relation to much less widespread use of animals, many fewer companies on tour less often. On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, in Australia there has been an ongoing skills exchange between classical circus families and contemporary circus. This was particularly the case in the early years of the contemporary artform.

The second “wave” is seen as the influence of “New” or “Alternative” circus, starting overseas around the mid 1970s and quickly influencing Australian performers in various areas, including theatre and dance. In turn, the changes in the theatre scene played a part in the emergence of contemporary circus. There is still a somewhat blurred understanding of when (and indeed, where) New/Alternative circus became “contemporary circus”. Indeed, these ways of referring to emergent forms of circus continued to be used interchangeably in some contexts into the late 80’s early 90’s. What is not contested, as I suggested in the Introduction, is the influence of radical theatre, especially as it developed in Melbourne and Sydney, on the development of contemporary circus.

The third “wave” of change is perceived to lodge in the interactions between physical theatre and contemporary circus that have occurred from late 1980s to now. For example, the training regimes and performance values of physical theatre companies such as Legs on the Wall and contemporary circus companies such as Circus Oz share many similarities, and personnel move between the forms.

Thinking in terms of states of becoming, it is helpful to notice that when New Circus and contemporary circus arrived in the artform’s history they each brought shifting

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19 There is currently discussion of a fourth “wave” not only in the Australian sector, but also internationally. This is being called “Post-Contemporary Circus”. Among other things it is marked by a recent global shift in the approach to company structures with a spike in the number of independent companies appearing, with autonomous operating structures and small ensemble casts. I explore this in Chapter Six in an analysis of new company structures and independent approaches to creating work.
aesthetics and ideologies, and thus differentiated themselves from the well-established and respected classical/traditional family circus model. Looked at from this perspective, there are more shared characteristics to be discovered between New Circus and contemporary circus than between either of them and classical circus. However, looked at from the perspective of the performance values, training regimes and skills deployed in all three sectors, it is clear that classical/traditional family circus continues to have a very significant influence on the directions taken by the emergent forms. So the picture is one of multi-directional movement and influence between forms, and it is not possible to draw clear demarcations between them.

It helps, therefore, to think about the states of becoming of the artform as territories (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). By doing so we can understand the “waves” or “stages of development” more usefully as complex movements between reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation. In the case of the production of something that is perceived as the creation of a new genre or era, it seems to most observers and participants that a deterritorialisation has taken place. In Chaos, Territory and Art (2008) Grosz explores how territories are formed in art, offering this explanation: “ Territory frames chaos provisionally, and in the process produces extractable qualities, which become the material and formal structures of art” (2008, p.16). She continues, “[t]erritory is always the coming together both of spatiotemporal coordinates (and thus the possibilities of measurement, precise location, concreteness, actuality) and qualities (which are immeasurable, indeterminate, virtual, and open-ended), that is, it is the coupling of a milieu and a rhythm” (2008, p.19). Here, in the recognition of a “coupling of a milieu and a rhythm”, Grosz is drawing, among other things, on the lengthy discussion of milieus and rhythms in relation to territoriality that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) undertake in the section of A Thousand Plateaus, “1837: Of the Refrain”. Jumping off from this, we can perhaps conceive of circus as having several territories operating within its historical narrative, and of there being a series of rhizomic movements within and between them – diagonal, transversal and sequential at once. In the course of those movements, speeds build up, lines of flight occur and new styles, subgenres what are perceived as “new” genres, emerge.

For Russell West-Pavlov (2009) “lines of flight are the routes that take us from one site of intensity to another, thus inciting a permanent state of creative transformation which is subjectivity in its true state” (202). This expression of the line of flight is useful in reminding us that although New Circus and contemporary circus represent a shift from the overall aesthetic and ideological interests of the classical form of circus, these new
forms still hold strands of connection to the previous version of circus, which in turn needs to be understood as the stage classical/traditional circus had reached in its state of becoming by the time New Circus and contemporary circus begin to differentiate themselves from it. There is a thread, a line that connects them to each other that remains unsevered to this day, and although deterritorialisations and reterritorialisations have occurred to create new territories or states of becoming within circus, there is a “middle” for the rhizomes they form, a milieu from which they all generated.

Deleuze and Guattari deploy the rhizomics of the relations between the wasp and the orchid to explain the taking-place of territorialisation:

How could movements of deterritorialization and processes of reterritorialization not be relative, always connected, caught up in one another? The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid’s reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome. It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing its image in a signifying fashion (mimesis, mimicry, lure, etc.). But this is true only at the level of the strata – a parallelism between two strata such that a plant organization on one imitates an animal organization on the other. At the same time, something else entirely is going on: not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp. Each of these becomings brings about the deterritorialization of one term and a reterritorialization of the other; the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialization ever further. (1987, p.10)

Thinking in this way we can more readily understand how the contemporary version of circus always contains a connection to its antecedents. For instance in the mid to late 1970s classical/traditional circus skills were appropriated by radical theatre and street theatre groups, thus classical/traditional circus was deterritorialised to provide aspects of radical and street theatre, while at the same time those forms were reterritorialised in ways that provided aspects of contemporary circus. There was some resistance the “new” or contemporary form of circus by some of the classical/traditional families in various respects, but I have also referred (see Introduction) to the role played by members of classical/traditional Australian circus families, such as the Ashtons, in the provision of training and skills development for the emerging contemporary circus companies. In any case, if we look back into the very early history of circus, in particular
to time of the Philip Astley\textsuperscript{20} and vaudevillian eras, circus has always derived and reconfigured itself from a range of influences, deterritorialising and reterritorialising itself to produce its various states of becoming.

Riding on the dynamic of third-wave feminism, the mid-1990s saw the arrival of the women’s circus movement with companies such as Women’s Circus (Melbourne) and Vulcanca Women’s Circus (Brisbane) appearing on the scene (see Chapter Four). In the 1990s there was also a shift in the style and format of some of the work being produced, with new independent companies taking a darker and more alternative approach. Further, the presence of the vaudeville-esque MC or classical/traditional circus ringmaster was becoming less apparent with some companies utilising more of a theatre inspired “fourth wall” aesthetic.

It could be observed that in Australia, contemporary circus was once again reterritorialised in the late 1990s through to the early 2000s, with another shift in the becoming of the artform. Key independent companies of the late 1980s to mid-1990s, Acrobat (Albury Wodonga) and Rock n Roll Circus (Brisbane) began presenting edgy ground breaking works with small casts and somewhat darker artistic content (see also Chapter Six). Rock n Roll Circus began from a community circus project and later evolved towards a more alternative and politically driven artistic aesthetic. Founding member Antonella Casella spoke to me about the potential she saw in the artform in those early days: “I really just saw in circus this possibility to tell everyday stories in exciting ways and to bring political theatre into an accessible artform” (Antonella Casella, Interview, June, 2016). The company gained momentum quickly with successful reviews and their work continued to develop in its political focus into the mid 1990s. In an interview, Rudi Mineur described how the independent nature of the company influenced their creative process during his time at Rock n Roll Circus (1992-1996).

The work was very political and beyond anything I had done before. The company was run as a collective, we made decisions as a group, no one was ‘the boss’. We made work based on the skills we were training but not necessarily in an act-driven way. We were more driven by our creative ideas which we then applied to the circus skills to create content. (Rudi Mineur, Interview, June 2015)

\textsuperscript{20} Philip Astley is considered the creator of modern circus. Around 1778 he introduced acrobats, pantomime and juggling alongside his existing equestrian shows, which were held in arenas that were referred to as “circle” or “circus” shows.
Their independent, collaborative creative process changed in 1999 when Rock n Roll Circus made the decision to employ an artistic director, Yaron Lifschitz, to take them towards their next level of development as a company. Lifschitz came from a theatre background, having graduated in 1991 from the directing course at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA). Prior to his role at Rock n Roll Circus he had been Artistic Director at the Australian Museum’s Theatre Unit. With no background in circus, Lifschitz brought a completely different artistic aesthetic to the company, so much so that in 2004 he formally re-branded it to become what is now known as Circa.

With this re-branding, contemporary dance inspired movements and aesthetics arrived in the company. The new aesthetic marked the deterritorialisation of Rock n Roll Circus and its reterritorialisation as Circa. This stage of becoming was met with some unrest within the sector. Something of a backlash occurred to this broader step away from classical/traditional circus towards a more theatrical and postmodern dance style, with many industry peers observing, “That’s not circus”. In an interview, juggler Davy Sampford spoke about this reaction, which occurred while he was an artist with the company during the transition period from Rock n Roll Circus to Circa:

I was told by many other circus performers that I shouldn’t be doing it. It needs diversity. I just thought I wonder why people were really down on us taking it in a direction that we wanted to go, applying other artforms to it. Our inspiration couldn’t really come from circus. Yaron came from theatre and dance. Inspiration wise, we were sort of inspired by what people weren’t doing. So I wondered why didn’t people just say, ‘okay I don’t really like that’ then leave it alone? It was a really adverse reaction, like they were trying to stop it. (Davy Sampford, Interview, August 2014)

I mentioned to Sampford that I was possibly one of those people having that kind of reaction to the work, and that even after years of watching Circa make work, I had gone into Circa’s shows with my own perception, with what I held as an idea of what circus should be, and that I would get frustrated that it wasn’t delivered to me. I experienced this reaction even though I knew what style of work Circa made. Sampford commented that one position the sector expressed at that time was to stress the popular nature of circus and indicate that they felt that Circa were effectively taking that element away.

People would tell me that circus isn’t serious, it is a popular artform. It should always be viewed that way. If you want to mess with it, you must keep that in mind. Pretty much everybody gave us that feedback. This idea that circus is ‘The people’s artform’. Art is up here and is a posh thing and circus is for the workers. It was very much a sort of ‘circus is meant to be left wing’ and contemporary art, well, if you want to go down that line, it’s
more intellectual, therefore ‘more intellectual’ was considered a bad word at the time, snobby etc. (Davy Sampford, Interview, August 2014)

I shared with Sampford that the longer I had been in the circus industry as both an artist and a researcher, the more circus I had seen, and the longer I had thought about it and written about it, the more my opinion of “what circus is” or “what circus should be” had unravelled. Admittedly, I still have my own strong preferences for certain aesthetics. Nevertheless I have come to understand that circus is whatever it needs or wants to be at any given time. It is always in a constant state of unravelling itself and redefining itself. As an academic, this realisation makes “defining” the artform, a very challenging task. This is why I have tried to find ways of conceptualising this that enable me to resist definition altogether, instead acknowledging constant change as the state of things.

In many ways circus is still considered to be “the people’s artform” and although there continues to be resistance to notions of “high art” (although to a lesser extent) in what people have come to recognise as family entertainment, there is a wider acceptance of diversity within the aesthetic of the artform from inside the sector.

Further and more significantly, the influence of the new aesthetic that Circa pioneered can be seen globally, where it has been emulated in companies in Europe and Canada, not to mention here in Australia where now, more than ten years later, the “Circa style” is quite common within contemporary circus. In hindsight, in the early 2000s Circa was breaking ground and taking enormous creative risks to forge new territory and create a new form within the sector. That movement of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation that occurred in Circa created a global shift, shaking up again what we perceived to be “circus” – yet again changing perceptions of where circus can go artistically.

It could be said that artists from all disciplines benefit from new modes of thinking and provocation, not only to remain relevant to their audiences, but also to their identity as artists. Circus director and former ACAPTA director Gail Kelly, touched in interview on the influence that popular culture and politics has had on the artform:

All of the companies that are or have been seminal are all a part of their cultural time. They are influenced by the popular culture of the time and the political energy of the time. Robin Laurie said to me that they started Circus Oz because they were frightened that live performance in Australia would die due to the invention of colour TV! They were worried that no one would go to see live arts unless it was connecting or it was vibrant. (Gail Kelly, Interview, November 2015)
My position as a practitioner and scholar is that circus, due to its rhizomic nature, its resilience, and its capacity to move with the times and re-imagine itself, will always adapt and transform – new aesthetics and new approaches to process will emerge from a field that is already marked by multiple differences.

**Thinking from the middle about contemporary circus**

We can, then, make this observation: given that circus is already in an ongoing state of becoming, marked by constant movements of de- and re-territorialisation, it will doubtless continue to see shifts in aesthetic and company structures that add further layers, other segmentarities, additional transversals to the artform. As I proposed earlier, if we think about the unfolding of becomings and movements between territories in contemporary circus in Australia as at once impelled by and impelling lines of flight, rather than as “eras” or moments in time, we begin to see that they are all generating from the same milieu in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of an in-between, a “middle” for rhizomic formations. That milieu consists of the many strands, layers, intersections, reactions against, loops back to, and echoes of classical/traditional circus, new/alternative circus, and the many temporal and spatial shifts in contemporary circus as far as it has developed. This is why Deleuze and Guattari think about territories and milieus in terms of the “refrain” – within continuous becoming there are returns, repetitions, reflections, echoes which in turn produce certain rhythms in the sense of movements-between (rather than of regular beats). This allows us to understand the development of the artform not through a series of clearly demarcated “waves”, categories or off-shoots that produce forms that are entirely “new”, but in terms of contemporary circus becoming-itsel-becoming-otherwise, with all kinds of strata and substrata, threads and breaks, intensities and lines of flight.\(^{21}\)

In *Space in Theory: Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze* (2009), West-Pavlov remarks that:

> Lines of flight are lines which lead away from the centred site of gaze and out of the ordered picture. Lines of flight are vectors which lead over the horizon, towards that which cannot yet be represented. They are escape routes out of the cage of codification – codification of social practice, rules of behavior, modes of thought, axiomatic philosophies. (2009, p.202)

The multiple vectors through, in, and over-the-horizon-from contemporary circus in Australia have been variously impelled by earlier versions of itself and “new” circus;

\(^{21}\) Even without notions of rhizomes, territories, lines of flight and becomings, we can perhaps also think about the structuralist and poststructuralist emphasis on the absence of origins in art due to the intertextuality of all creative expressions.
aspects of other artforms that it has drawn into its repertoire; its on-again, off-again love affair with classical/traditional circus; its on-again, off-again relations with its self-construction as ideologically radical, resistant, irreverent, which can be cut across by vectors of high-art aesthetics and values, that in turn exist in what is more often than not productive creative tension with its treasured larrikinism and left political project.

We need to exercise some caution, too, in how we respond to the foregoing excerpt from West-Pavlov, in that like all excerpts, there is much that is not in the frame. Most notably, temporally and spatially, rhizomatics is an operation that relies on in-betweens, movements from the middle, the milieu, involving the production of intensities/speeds that characteristically encourage the formation of multiplicities – as rhizomes, territories, assemblages, segmentarities and connections, intensities and lines of flight. Having no beginning and no end, rhizomes and the lines of flight/vectors that they impel, are unbound in space, time and directionality. The horizons over which they “lead” may be past, present, future, then, now later, sometime, any time; here, there, near, far, altogether elsewhere; this way, that way, the other way, some way we have not yet noticed.

Thus, when we acknowledge that certain “essences” of vaudeville are present in the work of companies such as Briefs Factory and Circus Oz, and in many contemporary sideshow acts, it may be that they are present because they have never actually been absent, except as a matter of degree; or they may have been completely absent for a decade or two until they seem to someone to be the best way to make a transition in a show and/or to introduce an older aesthetic into a current performance context precisely to suggest temporality, “pastness”\(^{22}\); or perhaps they function as a refrain in the sense of a familiar, long-established aspect of performance revisited with relative frequency to function, like the refrain of a song or instrumental piece, as an echo, a motif, a reminder for the singer or player of the next moment of transition, and at the same time, through their familiarity, “a way into the work” for the audience.

Whether or not current audience members are aware of the actual links to classical/traditional family circuses that continue to exist in many contemporary companies and training institutions, the effects/affects brought to a production, to performance values, to spatial, temporal and affective relations, by echoes of

\(^{22}\) Like the well-established convention of using black and white in film or photography to suggest the past in a narrative or documentary made entirely in the present with no need at all for the use of older resources. The sense of “pastness” is deliberately produced by black and white techniques used in current creative processes.
classical/traditional circus have an equally complex array of vectoral potentialities for those audience members. If a show takes place in a tent with aesthetic and spatial resonances of a Big Top, audiences will certainly bring a whole range of classical/traditional expectations and values with them into the performance space. That same show performed in the open or in a theatre is likely to open out to multiple other interpretations in terms of spatial relations and values. And performed in a Spiegel tent the show will evoke other kinds of “pastness”, a different sense of locatedness in time, space, culture/s. I deal with spatiality at length in Chapter Two. Here I want to focus on two strands of thinking about lines of flight as they generate within and pass through contemporary circus.

The first is that there are obvious links in this discussion of vectors/lines of flight to my earlier mention of Grosz’s (2008) interest in how Deleuze understood the interactions between chaos, territory and art. In particular, I cited Grosz on the potential “couplings” between milieu and rhythm, refrains and territories. When I draw back from close concentration on the complex rhizomics of contemporary circus to consider the part these interactions and “couplings” can play in processes of art and creativity more generally, in some ways things become less challenging. I believe there are many features of how creativity functions through movements in-between past and present, this space and that space, this direction and that direction that can be observed about any creative practice. Likewise, ideas about rhizomes, assemblages, lines of flight and so on have been widely explored in relation to creative practice. However, it is also my considered view that while all creative practices can be considered using ideas drawn from Deleuze and Guattari, and other scholars influenced by them, currently contemporary circus probably has a great deal more to gain. This is partly because of the multiplicity of characteristics, facets and movements I have been mapping in this chapter, and partly because established ways of thinking about performing arts in terms of skills, form, structure, aesthetics, relations between theory and practice etc, sooner or later break down when one tries to use them with regard to contemporary circus. There is also another explanation I mentioned much earlier, which is that unlike other established artforms, contemporary circus in Australia has not had the benefit of extensive scholarly attention. It is, in fact, significantly under-conceptualised, under-

theorised, and certainly has not yet been attributed such familiar performing arts frameworks as a “practice philosophy”.

Some, especially those working in Australian contemporary circus, may argue that this is not a bad thing given the very qualities I have been sketching out – the artform’s malleability, dynamism, edginess, political interests, openness to transformations, new connections and experimental sub-genres. We need to notice, though, that this relative absence of scholarly engagement is quite probably explained at least to some extent by the construction of classical/traditional circus as popular entertainment for the masses – happening in tents in fields, offered by transient companies, featuring performers who were viewed, as we have seen, as “outsiders” like “tramps and gipsies” (Tait, 1999, p.132) – and conceptions of circus in all its manifestations, including contemporary circus in Australia, as “the people’s artform” (Sampford, Interview, 2014).

I have spent considerable scholarly energy myself on analysing relations-between as they operate for classical/traditional circus and contemporary circus in Australia in order to provide a “map and not a tracing” because I want to ensure that the complexities of the rhizomics connecting these forms are recognised and understood. As a result, I can see very clearly indeed that there is a particular irony in the fact that contemporary circus in Australia has not yet been significantly territorialised by the scholarly enterprise, even as other popular arts-as-entertainment, like film, popular music, television, computer games, youth festival arts, have been the object of study for decades by scholars of great standing. This recognition makes it even more important from my point of view that as scholars we approach the study of contemporary circus with as much care and subtlety as we can muster. As an industry practitioner and scholar, I can’t help but feel the weight of responsibility that attends my own attempts to bring contemporary circus in Australia into the territories of scholarship. For me, how this occurs matters deeply.

I have approached this scholarly project throughout much more from a self-construction as a cultural theorist than as a person with expertise in performing arts theory24. Thus, even as I attempt to enrich appreciation of contemporary circus, I am reflexively alert to the dangers of deterritorialising the artform only to reterritorialise it in the rigid manner of some kinds of performance theory I have encountered. However,

24 While my first degree was in theatre and creative writing, from there I went into the working world of circus. When I returned to study it was to undertake a Master of Arts and Media with Honours, in which my coursework and research focused heavily on the intersections between cultural theory and cultural practice.
I try to remember West-Pavlov’s observation that “[d]e-territorialization does not mean the loss of being, but rather, an acceleration of being, a speeding up, a moving away, a change of being across the threshold of what is known at the current time, in the present place, or with the present framework of knowledge” (2009, p.204). That is, by virtue of the volatility of the characteristics I am mapping, the artform is likely to escape any accidental scholarly manoeuvre on my part that could run the risk of “pinning it down” inappropriately.

My second strand of thinking about lines of flight as they generate within and pass through contemporary circus in Australia is to observe how the examples of various vectors that I have provided above can also be recognised as tracings which can be “put back on the map” in multiple ways from multiple perspectives. In itself, this offers opportunities to resist any impetus on the part of my scholarly work that might run counter to my sense of the most valuable and exciting attributes of the sector as I understand them from my perspective as a long-term practitioner. I understand that this self-positioning is personal, subjective, definitely not “objective”, and I also stress that it has been a key factor in the effectiveness of reflexive thinking as an insider researcher. At the same time, I have taken a great deal of account of the contributions of my interviewees, who have provided balance, perspective and insights from the perspectives of practice. Identifying the artistic aesthetics and ideological individualities that allow appreciation of the span of unique contributions to the sector, indeed, aids the process of mapping the lines of flight of the artform.

However, just as crucial are the commonalities that mark the sector as a whole – the shared features that make Australian work stand out, that make us identifiable as an industry beyond our individual artistic multiplicities. In Australian contemporary circus, major companies sit alongside each other with varying aesthetics and artistic fingerprints, but all demonstrate an energy and physicality that is identifiable as “Australian”. International audiences recognise a common ground that binds those signature styles together. Much of this can be credited to Chinese acrobatic technique: its rhizomic influence can be seen in the robust nature of our skill level. It is also frequently remarked that our “Australianness” is noticeable. Natano Fa’anana from independent company Casus and formerly in Briefs Factory observed in interview that as artists working overseas we seem to approach our tours with a particular professionalism characterised by a hard-working ethic and a laid back presence that people seem particularly to associate with Australia. I spoke to Fa’anana and his Casus
colleague Jesse Scott about this while they were on tour in Montreal. In connection to touring, Fa’anana said:

Recently, I have been doing a lot of the producing work in the company, which means I have been dealing directly with the venues and festivals that hire us. And a lot of the feedback I get about us and about Australian circus artists in general is that we’re actually just not difficult to work with. There is no pretentiousness. We get in there and help sweep the stage; we acknowledge the front of house staff as much as we do the big producers. (Natano Fa’anana, Casus Interview, July 2016)

Scott thinks this comes from the way our sector operates within Australia:

We are a small industry in Australia so we have to be friendly with each other. We are always at the same festivals so we see each other often. We frequently share venues, sometimes we share equipment to make each other’s tours easier. And at the end of our shows, we often have drinks together in the artists’ bar. This builds community and a connectedness that we generally carry when we tour outside of Australia. I think that is part of why we are programmed successively. (Jesse Scott, Casus Interview, July 2016)

Due to similarities in work ethic and disposition, Australian contemporary circus as a sector has therefore become known for more than just great shows. Perhaps this authenticity of character is also evident within the performance of the work, in the delivery of the skills and the energy of the artists. It could be described as our signature, our particular way of doing what we do. Deleuze and Guattari were alert to the importance of the relationship between expression, agency, style and affect:

The signature becomes style. In effect, expressive qualities or matters of expression enter shifting relations with one another that ‘express’ the relation of the territory they draw to the interior milieu of impulses and exterior milieu of circumstances. To express is not to depend upon; there is an autonomy of expression. (1987, p.317; emphasis in original)

As a sector, we are eclectic in our artistic expression and styles, while at the same time there is an identifiable consistency in the degree of technicality of physical skill and professional etiquette. In Chapter Two, I look further into the artform’s development and current expressions through discussion of the impact of the spatial characteristics of venues on performance and reception, and case studies of the role of circus cities in Australia. This reveals how the architecture and topography of each city has influenced its local circus sector. I will also explore how the hubs and hives of contemporary circus around the country and internationally run across each other, form connections and generate offshoots. It is crucial that we pay attention to the
spatiality of circus in terms of city circumstances, as well as in relation to the impact of venues on how circus evolves in the spaces available to it.
Chapter Two: Networks, hubs and rhizomes

Contemporary Circus and Spatiality

Spatiality is vital to circus. Since its early days, it has required a great deal of technical capacity from it venues. For example, trapeze performance was introduced in the late 1800's and since then high roofs and what we now call rated rigging points have been fundamental spatial requirements to carry the dynamic load of aerial bodies. Ground-based acrobatics also require sufficient ceiling height for acrobats to perform without colliding with the roof. This is why, in the early history of circus performance, shows were often performed inside specially made tent structures or large hippodrome theatres. The temporary nature of the tent also allowed classical circuses the capacity to have a mobile show that they could pack up and move to the next town, creating their own tour circuit. This nomadic mobility contributed to the perception of circus people as fringe dwellers and outsiders to “normal” society, because they operated in their own fashion, moving from town to town in their own relatively portable parallel universe. Chapter One demonstrates that the lines of flight decipherable in the history of Australian contemporary circus, marked by ongoing movements of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, allowed it to exist always in the in-between or “intermezzo” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). It is always already becoming. It could, then, also be observed that the circus milieu as an in-between is both reflexive in terms of practice and a reflection of the transient and mobile origins of circus’s spatiality.

A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo. Even the elements of his dwelling are conceived in terms of the trajectory that is forever mobilizing them. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.380)

As remarked in my Introduction, the nomadic quality of the artform continues to attract misfits, eccentrics and “odd-bodies” who often fall outside belongings (Probyn, 1996) in relation to conventional society and often, too, in relation to other artforms such as dance and theatre. In my time as a circus practitioner I have noticed that many circus artists find the artform a safe space in which to celebrate, and at times intensify and promote, their difference and eccentricity. This can at times amplify the perception of circus artists as “misfits” on the part of those who are not associated with the circus sector. I recall a more conservative member of my family once remarking that my hair, which was a cherry-red colour at the time, along with my small collection of tattoos, were “quite outrageous”. As the least tattooed member of the circus company with
which I was currently performing when this observation was made, I did not see myself as particularly outrageous at all. That is, within the community that I belonged to, the great majority of my peers were heavily tattooed and brightly-coloured hair was not something that anyone really considered extraordinary or unusual. Perceived by a surprising proportion of people as misfits, it is common for circus artists to identify circus as enabling them to find ways of belonging, to express their creativity and “individuality” that other artforms simply cannot offer them. Probyn observes that, “[p]erhaps most importantly, the longing in belonging on the outside forces us to think about the role of desire in a fully social sense” (1996, p.13). Circus artists often desire a mode of belonging that is perceived as more authentic for them, where their difference is celebrated, their idiosyncrasies welcomed.

It is interesting that today, even though most contemporary circus artists reside in major cities and live in houses in suburbia, they are still to some extent framed as “outsiders” not only in the ways in which they may choose to express their individuality but also in their choice of dwelling. There can be a general misconception from the general public that that all circus artists perform mostly in touring tent-style shows and as a result, live in caravans or mobile homes. In fact, while the mobile-home is consistently present in the classical family circus sector, it is quite rare within the contemporary circus sector. We might also note that mobile homes and caravans are commonly present in the suburban driveways of ordinary Australian families. Perception is powerful, even in the presence of obvious evidence to counter that perception.

The spatiality of the artform continues to influence how its artists are perceived in contemporary socio-cultural circumstances. However, most contemporary circus is performed in more theatrical venues, and Big Tops are nowadays more likely to be encountered in the context of arts festivals or dedicated Spiegel tent performances. Companies such as Circus Oz and Cirque Du Soleil predominantly present their work in their own Big Top venues, but every so often even they play to theatre and stadium style venues as well.

Whether circus bodies are flying from the ceiling, bounding off walls or leaping across each other, circus has the capacity to fill a theatrical space in ways that its sister artform, theatre, often cannot. When circus is situated in spaces other than the traditional Big Top, for instance in a theatre, it shifts the social expectations or coding of that space. At the same time circus always responds to space, in that it seeks out the potentiality of a space and then applies the possibilities of the body to the space that it occupies.
For example, circus artists, and especially aerial performers, will always look up when entering a space – they see a space in different ways, in that they are constantly searching for the potential rigging points for their apparatus. In each space that they inhabit, circus artists seek the possibilities for flight, for climbing, for tumbling, for throwing. All circus uses its creativity and risk-taking to create a new performativity of space, and Australian contemporary circus is particularly renowned for finding ways to break the spatial parameters of performance.

As mentioned previously, the Australian contemporary circus sector is admired for its wide variety of aesthetics and styles. Australian companies alter the social coding of space in many different ways. Gravity and Other Myths (GOM) bring their audiences into the embodied performance of their work, going beyond conventional ideas of “audience interaction” by having members of the audience participate in their performances. For instance, an audience member might be invited to support an acrobat as part of a hand balancing sequence. As the GOM artist moves through her handstand act, the audience member becomes part of the acrobatic basing in the performance, supporting the weight of the artist’s legs as she moves in and out of the handstand sequence25. Scott Maidment, creative director of Strut n Fret Production House, consistently has performance occur around and in the audience, and in turn positions the audience within the performance. For example, in the show “LIMBO”, sway poles26 bend and hover over the audience with acrobats strapped to the top of the poles: the performance happens literally over the heads of the audience, by their sides, across their personal space. These kinds of creative choices regarding performance elements subvert the anticipated experience by transforming how audience members and acrobats “should” share a performance space.

The technical necessities, limitations or potentials of each space in which circus takes place – what might be thought of as the style and energy of the venue itself – informs and shapes the type of work that is created for it as well as how the work is read by its audience. In these ways, spatiality guides the artist and artistic choices. Most obviously, the technical capacity of a space must impact on what can be created in that space: a low ceiling will rule out most kinds of aerial performance, driving the work to become more ground-based in its elements. But there are many other interactions between

25 See Chapter Five for more detailed discussion of this particular performance and its element of audience participation.
26 A sway pole is similar to the Chinese pole apparatus that is mounted to the ground and is climbed by performers, however a sway pole has a flexibility in its movement that allows it to bend and sway at multiple angles.
space and the nature of performance. The aesthetics of spaces such as a Spiegel tent or a warehouse, which strongly emanate their own presence, significations and history, will inform how artists utilise these kinds of spaces, stylistically, narratively and technically. I referred earlier to Doreen Massey’s argument that space is never devoid of meaning, never empty or “closed”. Thus she urges

...that we recognise space as always under construction. Precisely because space on this reading is a product of relations between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far. (Massey, 2005, p.9)

Circus practitioners are influenced by the “stories-so-far” that are held within the spaces they create work in and for. Spaces in which contemporary circus is performed are never, in fact, blank canvasses. Circus applies movement to a space, building on and enriching the “story-so-far” that the space currently and potentially tells. A key Australian example of this was Mel Fyfe’s role as the Circus Oz Strong Woman, in which she performed a back bend balancing a concrete slab on her stomach, while fellow cast member, Mat Wilson, smashed the concrete slab to pieces with a sledgehammer. This performance took place in the Circus Oz Big Top and in major theatres around Australia. Fyfe was unshakeable in her strength, balance and resilience during this act, thus physically and symbolically critiquing the perceived “fragility” of women in society while simultaneously providing a powerful and unselfconscious demonstration that circus can literally smash preconceived notions of gendered bodies and spaces. The act had a range of affects in any one performance, making some audience members uncomfortable, provoking awe in many and inspiring others to cheer triumphantly in their shared experience of this reminder of what a woman’s body can do.

Chaos, order and bodies in performance

In many ways it is not so much the circus apparatus as the presence of circus bodies and their movements that produces a space that becomes circus. Erin Manning (2012) argues that it is quite impossible to consider the importance of bodies without considering the space they occupy, and moreover, it is therefore unfeasible to theorise space without taking into account one’s own corporeal relation to it:

When space-time is no longer entered but instead created, it becomes possible to think the body-world as that which is generated by the potential
inherent in the preacceleration of movement. Movement takes time. But movement also makes time. (Manning, 2012, p.17)

Bodies are at the centre of circus as an artform and are henceforth the catalyst to how a circus space is encountered.

By those who sit outside of it, circus can be experienced as, and so assumed to be, a highly chaotic and even reckless mode of performance. On the contrary, although circus utilises chaos and risk to derive its extreme performances of the body in space-time, it also relies heavily on order and control to execute such extraordinary physical feats. The performance of the circus body generates in an incredibly controlled state, but it is controlled chaos, chaosmosis.\(^2\) An audience witnesses an extraordinary display of embodied practice when, for instance, a hula-hoopist separates several hoops across her body while balancing on a tight-wire, and it becomes even more extraordinary if above her aerialists and below her acrobats undertake equally difficult but different feats, and two clowns apparently disrupt all the acts, seemingly risking the performers' concentration and thus their safety.

While many audience members may feel as though they are “on the edge of their seats” amid the seeming chaos of the circus, what they are seeing are elevated performances of embodied cognition. Productions often rely on creating the illusion of disorder and many circus performances invite audiences to thrill as multiple movements take place simultaneously in the one space. However, circus artists also design the uses of space so that, immersed in a chaos of colour and movement, the same audience can experience moments of breath-holding stillness, as a single act or artist enters the completely smooth space of life and death risk – such as flying through the air while hanging by a single heel on trapeze. That apparently smooth space is, of course, the most striated, or highly ordered, of all circus spaces in terms of highly disciplined skills, endless rehearsals, safety considerations, calculated risks – striations that remain invisible to audiences.

In “1837: Of the Refrain” Deleuze and Guattari allude to the concept of stability within chaos:

> Sometimes chaos is an immense black hole in which one endeavors to fix a fragile point as a center. Sometimes one organizes around that point a calm and stable ‘pace’ (rather than a form): the black hole has become a

\(^2\)Felix Guattari refers to James Joyce's concept of chaosmos, using the term chaosmosis to refer to the flow (controlled chaos) that can occur within a chaotic process in his work *Chaosmosis: an ethico-aesthetic paradigm* (1995).
home. Sometimes one grafts onto that pace a breakaway from the black hole. (1987, p.312)

Circus artists utilise chaos to create the appearance of disorder as part of the illusory effects on which exciting performance depends. For the acrobat, though, it is also the case that chaos – as smooth space – enables creativity and flow. Circus artists embrace physical and creative risk, perceiving this as a point of “centrality” in their creative process. In the terms I’ve been developing, it can be thought of as a milieu from which their process unfolds.

The depiction of risk as obvious or not obvious to audiences, the extent of actual risk undertaken, and how much insight audiences are given into processes of risk, varies from production to production, context to context, act to act. These variations depend on the artistic choices made by the artists, the director, or both, and a significant element in making those choices is how the spatiality of the performance is layered on to the “stories-so-far” held within the architecture of the venue. Grosz (1995) writes:

The exploration of conceptions of space and time are necessary correlates of the exploration of corporeality. Two sets of interests are defined in reciprocal terms, for bodies are always understood within a spatial and temporal context, and space and time remain conceivable only insofar as corporeality provides the basis for our perception and representation of them. (1995, p.85)

The corporeality of artists and audiences, the spatiality of the venue, how ways in which artists utilise the space in relation to audiences, and the temporal associations artists and audiences bring to the space (as memories, nostalgia, anticipation, expectation, even confusion) are all in play in relation to how a circus performance is perceived and received, and thus in determining its affective impact.

Circus cities

In Australia, classical family circus and contemporary circus exist in every state in some form, however there are some places in which circus hubs tend to flourish more than in others. Why? Is it the culture of the place itself – the people who reside there, their cultural backgrounds, values and lifestyle choices? Certainly this sense of a city’s culture informs the development of a “circus culture” in a town or city but it isn’t the sole influence. The spatiality of a city also plays a significant part in how certain artforms settle in and set up a belonging that enables an arts sector to thrive.
It is important to note that as a world leader in contemporary circus, the Australian sector – its spatiality, its hubs and networks – operate in very different ways to Quebec, Canada, a region that has also achieved global recognition as a leader in the artform. Unlike Quebec, Australia does not host the majority of its industry's training, production and performance facilities and in turn, key companies and independent practitioners, in one major city. In Quebec the contemporary circus industry predominantly operates out of Montreal which hosts a precinct called “Cité des Arts du Cirque” which is home to Cirque du Soleil Headquarters, École National de Cirque and the circus dedicated performance centre of La Tohu. In addition to these high profile companies, the leading companies Cirque Eloize and Les 7 doigts de la main (The 7 fingers of the hand) are based in Montreal along with the influential festival Montréal Complètement Cirque, that fills the city with contemporary circus in mid-July each year.

Australia however, has two leading circus cities among the state capitals – Melbourne and Brisbane host the majority of Australian contemporary circus companies and have the highest density of circus practice. However, the long-established, very much smaller circus hub of the regional city of Albury Wodonga, home to the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, continues to make a dynamic contribution to the sector. Furthermore, other state capitals are becoming satellite circus cities as small but growing nodes of activity have developed in Adelaide, Sydney and Perth. Australia also has several key arts and cultural festivals that are particularly identified with circus. The Adelaide Fringe Festival is at the forefront in its support for the artform, consistently and generously programming contemporary circus at least since the late 1970s. Similarly, other festivals have been increasingly programming contemporary circus and being rewarded with warm audience responses. Most notably, the Woodford Folk Festival has consistently programmed local and national circus artists as well as hosting circus workshops and including emerging artists in the circus cabaret element of their festival.

Below I undertake case studies of several of these circus cities and contemporary circus-friendly festivals, drawing on examples that are clearly major hubs and drivers of sectoral activity but also exploring other examples that might be more limited in scope and scale, but make a significant contribution by providing opportunities for acts and companies to gain profile, make connections and develop skills.

My research suggests that the especially mixed cross-sectoral nature of the geographic links, site-related activities, festival contexts and inter-arts engagements of Australian contemporary circus are consequences of and a contributing factors to the rhizomics of the artform – its ability to break off and start up somewhere else, and to
connect itself within and between different aspects of the itself in distinctive ways. Together the cities and festivals provide a milieu, an in-between or middle for contemporary circus and its practitioners, albeit an extraordinarily dispersed milieu. Artists, companies, directors, shows and creative potentials connect, brush up against each other, disconnect, reconnect, interact and intersect in many different ways across a very large continent, all of which both produces the various styles and sub-genres, company structures and aesthetic choices of the artform. The cities and festivals not only provide hubs and nodes in which intensities build up and from which lines of flight emerge, but the movements and connections between them have come to constitute a meta-layer of the generative milieu. This dispersed but dynamic milieu, I suggest, is the source of the “signature” of Australian contemporary circus. On a practical level, it encourages the kind of creative collaboration, mutual support and no-nonsense attitude encountered when Australian contemporary circus artists and companies tour nationally and internationally, to which Natano Fa’anana, Jesse Scott and others referred in interview. Aesthetically and ideologically, in terms of an apparent larrikin “Australianness” and edginess in performance to which audiences tend to respond warmly, it is surely the case that how the sector interacts in its national context, even as it is always already becoming many versions of itself, is a major element in how it presents internationally.

I am emphasising the national milieu because despite the size of the continent and thus the widespread host cities, training facilities, performance venues and networks that constitute that milieu, the rhizomic relations that generate from it are produced by an extraordinary array of people and companies who all familiar with each other. Although a really quite remarkable proportion of Australian companies and sideshow acts are touring nationally and internationally at any one time, at various times in any cycle of two or three years various combinations of Australian circus people meet at various nodes and hubs constituted by cities, festivals and conferences in Australia and overseas. When they meet, they make further connections, have new ideas, build fresh collaborations and so on. The sheer variety and energy involved in the creative arrangements encouraged by the dispersed-yet-closely-acquainted characters and characteristics of Australian contemporary circus enable large independent companies, small to medium companies and freelance practitioners to connect in many different ways, thus producing what we can call a thriving assemblage.

In *Deleuze and Geophilosophy* (2004) Bonta and Protevi explain Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the assemblage as: “...an intensive network or rhizome displaying
‘consistency’ or emergent effects by tapping into the ability of self-ordering forces of heterogeneous material to mesh together” (p.54). As such an assemblage, the networks and flows of the Australian contemporary circus sector cultivate an ongoing, multifaceted process of industry growth and artistic development. This occurs not only between companies but through connections with other artforms, which in turn fosters the geographical and creative reach of the form.

The rhythm of a circus city is both a reflection of the rhizomic nature of the artform, and reflexive, in that it is aware of its role as a circus city, actively considering the implications of that role. It is the former that makes the city amenable to circus, but it is the latter that enables it to remain that way and continue to benefit from the relationship. Returning to ideas about maps and rhizomes that they have used a little earlier in A Thousand Plateaus (1987, p.12) and that I cite in Chapter One, Deleuze and Guattari explain the operation of the rhizome in contrast to various arts:

The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots. Unlike the graphic arts, drawing or photography, unlike tracings, the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight. (1987, p.21)

When I considered the major circus cities in Australia and the spaces that are occupied by circus artists to train, create and present their work, I began to notice that often the architecture of the city impels the creative works produced there. There is a range of other contributing factors regarding how comfortably contemporary circus occupies the leading circus cities in Australia. These include the artform’s continuous momentum and dynamic capacity for transformation, its resilience and the rhizomic nature of its escalation from a “sub-set” of radical theatre drawing on aspects of classical and “New” circus to a major arts sector in its own right. That is, contemporary circus does not behave like a tracing, rather it makes its own mappings as it is becoming its various versions of itself, which are always open to change. In this sense of becoming, contemporary circus exhibits and relies on the kind of malleability and flow that is described by Deleuze and Guattari above. When the spaces that a city provides facilitate this by allowing artistic flow to occur in connectable and transformable ways, rhizomes can generate and artistic assemblages can form. These, in turn enable belonging and plane of consistency which allow the flows of the artform to connect with each other and with the city. In this sense, the artform takes on the affordances of the city and the city takes on the rhythm of the art form. A symbiotic relationship develops.
Cultural geographer Michael Crang explores how, through the repetition of behaviours in a particular space, it can become “time-thickened”, that is, a space can become identified with and through the types of behaviours or cultural practices that repeatedly occur within it:

The continued repetition of particular sorts of behaviour comes to be associated with particular places, and newcomers are socialised into the sorts of behaviour found at those places. The result is places provide an anchor of shared experiences between people and continuity over time. Spaces become places as they become ‘time-thickened’. They have a past and a future that binds people together round them. (Crang, 1998, p.10)

Crang sees recurrence over time of behaviours in a space as part of what transforms a “space” into a “place”. Massey (2005) has problematised the theory that spaces become places through the addition of meaning. For her, as mentioned earlier, no space is ever “empty”, all spaces are always already replete with meaning, and spaces/places are never fixed but are constantly in flux. Nevertheless, Crang’s notion of “time-thickened” spaces/places is useful to my analysis of the cities that host the majority of circus activity in Australia in that it offers a temporal dimension to the spatial. His observation about the development of “anchors” lodged in the interactions between “people and continuity” offers a nice connection as well, not only to the ways in which cities become hubs, but also to the role of venues in this process, given the importance of anchor points for rigging etc in the suitability of a venue for circus. Allowing that a city is always a “full” space and always a space in flux, what we need to examine is the process of “time-thickening”: how people, public spaces, venues, events and actions used, repeated and developed over time all contribute to the making of multiplicities in a circus city.

Crang later observes that, “lived connection binds people and places together. It enables people to define themselves and to share experiences with others and form themselves into communities” (1998, p.103). Certain Australian cities identify themselves as “circus cities”, not only from the perspective of the circus artists who reside and create work there, but also in terms of the audiences who live there and regularly interact with circus performance in various capacities. Thinking this way, we could say that contemporary circus in Australia primarily “anchored” itself within the artistic communities of Melbourne and Brisbane, through the ongoing growth of companies and the increase in independent artists residing there, and also that the further development of the artform in those cities was encouraged by the continuing growth of a community that creates it and supports it. This pattern of intensification of
development over time is undeniably tied to the spatiality of these cities and the opportunities that certain spaces/places provide/d. To discover how those spatio-temporal interactions unfolded, we need to explore the rhizomics involved in the emergence of circus venues and other circus spaces in the circus cities.

Melbourne, Circus Oz and sectoral development

As outlined in Chapter One, Australian circus in its “new” or contemporary form primarily developed in the state of Victoria with Circus Oz and Flying Fruit Fly Circus. While FFFC continues to be located in Albury Wodonga, since those early years the city of Melbourne has been and continues to be particularly prominent in terms of the degree of activity in contemporary circus, housing key companies and high level training institutions. The key organisations and arts spaces which have either influenced or continue to influence and support contemporary circus practice in Victoria are: in Albury/Wodonga FFFC and Acrobat; and in Melbourne, The Pram Factory, La Mama, Circus Oz, The Circus Spot, Westside Circus, Fly Factory, Ruccis Circus, Trick Circus, Dislocate, Melbourne Fringe Festival, Women’s Circus, Blue Studios, Strut n Fret Production House, the National Institute of Circus Arts (NICA) and until 2016, the headquarters of ACAPTA. Melbourne also hosts various independent, freelance artists and emerging companies made up of NICA graduates who reside in the city and frequently move between companies.

Melbourne has experienced especially rapid developments in its spatial amenity for circus in terms of dedicated venues for training and artistic development, which have accelerated the growth not only of Melbourne-based contemporary circus, but the whole sector nationally. As noted in Chapter One, contemporary circus in Australia received its initial impetus in the late 1970s with Circus Oz, which then had the Pram Factory as its main venue. The prolific growth of the company, its evolution as a national and international touring company, the various spaces it has occupied during its development and its significant position in the city of Melbourne’s performing arts landscape have enabled strong audience development, audience association of circus with Melbourne, and thus a perception of Melbourne as a central place for circus in in Australia – a key circus city. Melbourne not only cements its position as a cultural leader and risk taker in contemporary circus, but contribute to the national growth of the sector. Simultaneously, the ongoing presence of Circus Oz in the city has achieved, in Crang’s (1998) terms, an “anchoring” across time and space – a consistent sense

28Adelaide and Perth saw some activity of New Circus prior the official formation of Circus Oz in 1978
of belonging for the artform. This helps explain why, even though the contemporary circus rhizome has proliferated across the nation and across the international scene, it also continually comes back to Melbourne. Lines of flight take off from Melbourne and have long done so, but, as already noted, “these lines always tie back to one another” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.9).

In 1977, when *Circus Oz* was still residing predominantly at The Pram Factory, founding member John Pinder put forward the idea for a restaurant-style show in a tent. A joint project with the Victorian College of Art, the tent show was performed in the gardens of the National Gallery of Victoria for a month over Christmas and New Year of 1978/79. They famously took on the task of making their own tent, by hand, rather than hiring or buying one. Sue Broadway noted that most of the rehearsal time for that show was actually spent making the tent rather than developing the show’s content (Sue Broadway, Interview, May 2015). Nevertheless the tent became an asset to the newly formed company, although it was never its central venue. *Circus Oz* continued to perform their work in local and interstate theatres with some sporadic touring using the tent as a venue.

For the next ten or so years, *Circus Oz* moved around Melbourne, occupying old warehouses and spaces that could accommodate their training needs. In the late 1980s they took up residence in an old factory in Port Melbourne, where they spent the next 15 years creating their work and also holding circus workshops for the general public. In 2012 (their 36th year as a company), after an extensive amount of grant writing, brokering and negotiation by the company, the Victorian Government approved a repurposing of an existing building to create an official home base for *Circus Oz*. Formally the Collingwood TAFE site, the venue underwent a $A15 million renovation to include rehearsal rooms, circus workshops spaces, a band room, a props workshop, costume department, offices, storage and a permanent on-site Spiegel tent.

Beyond the aspiration of building an ideal home base that would allow the company to grow, part of *Circus Oz*’s mission with their Collingwood space is to be able to support their peers within the Australian circus sector. This includes the provision of spaces for training circus skills and for holding creative developments for the creation of new works, as well as community-based initiatives using circus for social change. The Melba Spiegel Tent regularly hosts new work by both emerging and established artists. The Indigenous arm of *Circus Oz*, *BlakFlip*, has grown extensively since the move to

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29 College of Technical and Further Education – Australia’s government-funded vocational training sector.
the new building in 2014. As a result of the BlakFlip program, in 2017 the first all Indigenous circus troupe premiered its first work “Chasing Smoke” to a sold out season and five star reviews. Directed by Natano Fa’anana (Briefs Factory/Casus) the cast consisted of artists from across the country. Similarly, in late 2015, with the support of Circus Oz; an independent company of differently abled artists, The Fairground Project formed, showcasing the lack of and need for more diverse representations of bodies in circus. This project was initiated by Adelaide based artist Lachlan “Loki’ Rickus, during the 2014 ACAPTA Sector gathering in the Circus Oz Melba Spiegel Tent, where Rickus spoke up about the lack of opportunities for wheelchair bound artists like himself. Circus Oz took this up and brokered to create a space for more inclusive work to be made. Circus Oz’s new venue has so far once again demonstrated its capacity to extend its nodes of connection not only in its Melbourne “backyard”, but right across the national sector.

However, since the late 1970s, the city of Melbourne has seen an ongoing intensification of contemporary circus. One of the most important developments was the creation of NICA as Australia’s first and only tertiary training institution for circus. With its purpose built, state of the art training facilities, NICA has sparked enormous growth and an increased credibility for the national sector. NICA emerged after five years of negotiation and development with key members from the contemporary circus industry, led by Circus Oz alumni Jane Mullet, in collaboration with Pam Creed and Swinburne University. In 1999 a pilot program ran, with eight participants, in a warehouse facility in the Melbourne Docklands. The success of that program demonstrated the viability of a dedicated institution, and the training facility was built on Swinburne’s Prahan campus. The original building was impressive, housing several circus training rooms, offices and Gymnastics Australia training facilities; it has since been developed to include an adaptable, multi-function performance venue where NICA holds its student showcases, professional performances and graduation ceremonies.

NICA’s significance doesn’t lie only in its capacity to deliver high level circus skills training to contribute to the national sector. Since its inception, NICA has attracted students from various training backgrounds. While some of their intake comes from leading youth circus companies such as FFFC, Spaghetti Circus, Flipside Circus and others, it also attracts applicants from dance, gymnastics and acro-sports30. One very important aspect of NICA’s approach is its commitment to inclusivity and diversity in the training of circus artists.

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30 Acro-Sports is a competitive partner acrobatics sport centred around human pyramids of two or more people.
One of the things that drew me to help develop the university degree was that the artists of circus, once they finish performing, they don’t have a formal qualification to carry over, they have nothing. It is still the case in countries like Russia and in China. So if we have a degree, then we have a chance to change the history of career trajectory for these artists. Provide a mainstream education framework that does give people a platform to jump from, so that they can still enjoy developing their skills in the artform without sacrificing their entire lives. It has made a large impact on that side of the industry and has impacted on individuals who have undertaken the degree. (Gong Ruong Lu, Interview, November 2015)

Further, the existence of NICA has created opportunities for circus artists to become employed as trainers at the institution, as well as providing an opportunity for international circus trainers to take up long-term contracts as key staff members. Thus, NICA has extended its capacity beyond skills development into creating an employment ecology that continues to grow and foster ongoing international networks. NICA is now also considered a “feeder school” to the globally successful machine of Quebecois company Cirque du Soleil, with casting auditions held at the NICA space every two years or so, and Cirque du Soleil talent scouts often visiting the school to “headhunt” new talent. The international nodes of connection that have developed with NICA broaden the rhizomics of the Australian sector, linking the existing assemblage of local artists and companies to the international scene, and at the same time enriching global circus activities. Of course, global multiplicities are produced by other means, such as the impact of small to medium companies consistently touring internationally, discussed later in this chapter. For Deleuze and Guattari, though, a multiplicity “has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing its nature (the laws of combination therefore increase in number as the multiplicity grows)” (1987, p.8). That is, everything that occurs in the interactions between Australian contemporary circus and international contemporary circus activities – in training, recruitment of emerging artists, innovations in performance, tours, conferences, experienced artists and directors moving between companies –contributes to the making of multiplicities.

Although NICA is largely held in very high regard across the sector nationally and internationally, it is not without its critics – people who see its current impacts on the
artform as problematic, at least to some extent. With its enthusiastic output of highly skilled graduates entering contemporary circus annually, some are beginning to perceive it as having “flooded the market”, particularly in Victoria. Moreover, its curriculum is perceived as focusing primarily on skills development with considerably less emphasis on artistic prowess, critical appreciation of aesthetic diversity and the importance of comparative research and analysis. Some industry members have therefore identified a danger of NICA producing “homogenised” graduates, with high skill levels and technical proficiency, but lacking in the kind of “artistic chops” that have kept the contemporary circus sector so dynamic in Australia. In my experience in the industry and also the experience of others who have shared their views with me it could be said that there has been more focus on the technical capacity of NICA’s graduates than on their artistic potential. This is not to say that artistry is not supported by NICA’s training staff or that it is not developed within the current NICA curriculum, rather that the technical capacity of its students is often more developed and nuanced than their artistic skills. There has been a general consensus among NICA’s critics that more detail and focus on the elements of creativity and artistic expression within the curriculum would be greatly supported by the wider sector. This perception is sometimes positioned in contrast to leading companies in Victorian contemporary circus, such as Circus Oz and Acrobat, which demonstrate a high level of technical precision but are equally appreciated for their creativity and artistic risk-taking.

*Youth circus: spatiality and rhizomics*

Youth circuses play a vital role in the ongoing development of the artform. In the spaces they provide for training and development and in their capacity to feed their students across the sector into the professional realm and into higher training, institutes such as NICA, provide an ongoing influx of talent, functioning as a feeder system. It has been noted by several of the practitioners I have interviewed that NICA students originating from a youth circus background appear to have a greater understanding of creative practice from the outset. This demonstrates the extent to which the leading youth circus organisations in Australia are delivering a rounded learning experience for their students, covering not only technical skill development but also fostering creative risk-taking and individuality through consistent mentoring and performance outcomes.

It seems these students have been in an environment that not only supports their technical skill development, but also fosters creative risk-taking and diversity through consistent mentoring and performance outcomes. Australia boasts a substantial
number of youth circus organisations, relative to our national population. A considerable majority of these companies operate at an exceptionally high standard. As a long-standing youth circus practitioner myself, I define a youth circus organisation as one that is solely focused on youth. There are currently twenty-three organisations of this kind in Australia. They are:

- **Australian Capital Territory:** Warehouse Circus Inc
- **New South Wales:** Circus West (Dubbo), Flying Fruit Fly Circus\(^{31}\), Half High Circus, Spaghetti Circus, Zip Circus
- **Northern Territory:** Corrugated Iron Youth Arts, Solid State Circus\(^{32}\)
- **Queensland:** Blackrobats, Circus Stars, Flipside Circus, Kartwheel Kids, Sensory Circus
- **South Australia:** Cirkidz, Lolly Jar Circus
- **Tasmania:** Slipstream Circus
- **Victoria:** Ruccis Circus, Trick Circus, Westside Circus, Skylark Circus, Flying Fruit Fly Circus,
- **Western Australia:** Lunar Circus, Sandfly Circus, WA Circus School

I have listed these in relation to their host states in order to demonstrate the extent to which they cover the country, but I should also stress that a significant proportion of these organisations are located in regional cities or towns, which is important for young people given the enormous size of most Australian states.

In addition to these stand-alone youth circus organisations, youth circus programs also feature in many small to medium circus companies, for example, Circus Oz, Circa, Vulcana Women’s Circus, Circus Monoxide, Aerialize. While such companies have successful youth circus outcomes, their core business is predominantly to deliver either professional performance-based work for touring purposes, or to deliver workshop programs for adults. Certainly the most prominent youth circus organisations in Australia are acknowledged as FFFC (established 1979), Spaghetti Circus (est. 1992), Cirkidz (est. 1985), and Flipside Circus (est. 1998). Many graduates from these leading youth circus companies enter the professional sector, whether they go on to attain further training at NICA or international circus schools such as Beijing Circus School and École Nationale de Cirque (Quebec), or go into the industry directly, taking up

\(^{31}\) FFFC are also considered a Victorian company as their location of Albury/Wodonga straddles the border of NSW and Vic
\(^{32}\) Formerly in VIC
Their presence is a reflection of the influence of the artists and practitioners who have guided them and mentored them along the way. They create new lines of flight in the sector, they might be seen as constituting a new assemblage and as also remaining part of the greater industry assemblage. At the same time, those who have trained together often maintain their connections between the different sites in which they work. This reminds us about the ways in which the Australian contemporary circus sector weaves across itself, plugs into existing assemblages, creates new lines of flight, makes multiplicities and so produces succession and growth:

What was composed in an assemblage, what was still only composed, becomes a component of a new assemblage. In this sense, all history is really the history of perception, and what we make history with is the matter of a becoming, not the subject matter of a story. Becoming is like the machine: present in a different way in every assemblage, passing from one to the other, opening one onto the other, outside any fixed order or determined sequence. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.347)

Australian youth circuses and circus schools create rhizomes that move away from the youth circus companies that nevertheless permanently reside within the milieu. Moreover the spaces of the leading youth circus companies in Australia, and the communities that are forged in them, create opportunities for “circus hubs” to operate. These are hubs where local and touring artists can rehearse work and develop new work, where skills can be passed on from visiting artists to youth circus students and so on. For example, the “home” bases of FFFC, Spaghetti Circus, Flipside Circus and Cirkidz, often provide spaces for established local artists or visiting artists to utilise in order to develop their skills and/or create new work. Sometimes they take on concurrent teaching or skills sharing in exchange for the use of the space. Others established artists teach in youth circus in order to supplement income while they are not on tour. Thus, not only do youth circuses contribute to the creativity and skills development of the national scene, they also provide opportunities for skills exchange and income generation, creating a system that supports ongoing work for practitioners in Australian contemporary circus.

A collaborative relationship develops as youth circus companies provide income opportunities for artists and in turn the youth circus companies benefit from the skills boost that the visiting artists supply to the circus school in the form of workshops and mentoring. Such exchanges feed into the circus ecology while at the same time further developing a youth circus company’s network and knowledge base. In the process of
teaching workshops and mentoring emerging artists at the youth circus level, guest professional artists also share their signature aesthetics and creative processes, transferring elements of it into youth circus, encouraging more depth in the professional development processes in the youth circus sector. This, in turn, strengthens connections between youth circus and the wider national sector, fostering networks between the visiting artists and the youth circus students, who when they go on to work professionally, can later find themselves collaborating with their former teachers.

Here it is useful to remember Deleuze and Guattari’s description of the rhizome that develops between the wasp and the orchid. In particular, their emphasis on the relations being “not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming” (1987, p.10, cited above) can inform how we might think about the movements of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation that occur in the exchanges between youth circus companies and visiting professional mentors. Youth circus students have the opportunity to “capture the code” of the visiting artists and thread it into their own practice, and so “the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities” (1987, p.10, cited above). This is made possible by the sharing of space.

If we look further into the spatial movements of FFFC, Spaghetti Circus, Flipside Circus and Cirkidz as the recognised leaders in youth circus in Australia, it becomes clear how their venues have fostered networks and enabled growth for their local sectors. The kinds of spaces that circus schools require to operate, with suitable architecture and technical capacities (e.g. high ceilings with rated beams), are rare, often situated in industrial areas and/or quite expensive to rent. There is always a danger that the site will be re-developed, or that rent will increase to an extent that the youth circus may no longer be able to accommodate the financial risk. This is a burden that weighs on most companies in the Australian sector. Circus is unique in how highly site specific it is, but this also positions it in danger of losing its venues or not having enough suitable venues in which to create and perform work.

Each of the leading youth circus organisations have home-base facilities, circus spaces, that have become nodes of creation and productivity within the national ecology of the sector. FFFC’s old premises nicknamed “The Y”33 by its students, not only housed FFFC training and performance preparations, but also played host to the annual National Training Project (NTP), an event that brings the national contemporary

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33It was the old Albury Wodonga YMCA building repurposed as the FFFC space
circus sector together for two weeks for exchange of skill development and for knowledge sharing. This event has been running for over 20 years. In 2010 FFFC opened a new purpose-built headquarters with state of the art facilities, which enabled them to continue to host the NTP, but also to open their space up more often to the wider sector, enabling local and visiting companies to use it to run creative development workshops, develop their skills and hold show rehearsals. That many FFFC graduates have gone on to work in leading national companies such Circa, Circus Oz, Company 2 and Briefs Factory is of course due to the company’s very high profile in youth circus nationally and internationally, but more recently, it can also be attributed to the many opportunities that their venue now provides for FFFC trainees to come into more frequent contact with major industry practitioners and companies.

Founded in 1995 by Leonie Mills, Spaghetti Circus is situated in the small town of Mullumbimby in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales. It began as a small, community-driven group focused primarily on providing a space for young people to participate in creative expression and healthy risk taking through circus. From its inception, this youth circus company involved itself in many ways in its community through workshops, performances and community engagement projects, and in doing so, “anchored” a place and identity for youth circus across the Northern Rivers. Taking up residence at the Mullumbimby Showground\textsuperscript{34}, Spaghetti Circus set up their circus school home base at first in a small shed. Soon enough the rapid growth of the company meant that it had outgrown the small shed, and through its dedication and affiliation with the local community, the company was able to secure funding to erect a purpose-built second shed in the showgrounds. The new venue was designed with a higher ceiling to accommodate high-level acrobatics and aerial performance. With this new space, an influx of interest and artistic nurturing took place, with visiting artists travelling to Mullumbimby to teach workshops and to set up a temporary flying trapeze rig on the showground site. Since then Spaghetti Circus has thrived as a youth arts company, while still remaining true to its community connections. Spaghetti Circus graduates have gone on to high-level training institutions such as NICA and École Nationale de Cirque, and can be seen performing in companies such as Circa and Gravity and Other Myths. As a venue, the Spaghetti Circus home base is now also the site for the biannual Mullumbimby Circus Festival (discussed further later in this

\textsuperscript{34} In the Australian context a showground is the facility in which a rural community holds its annual agricultural show. A regional showground conventionally consists of a mix of arenas for equestrian events, parades, wood-chopping competitions etc, space for travelling sideshows and rides, pavilions for exhibition of rural produce, stables and large barns with stalls for other livestock.
chapter). The significance of the *Spaghetti Circus* contribution was made apparent on a national scale in 2017, with founder Leonie Mills being awarded an Order of Australia Medal in recognition of her contribution to the youth arts sector and to the local community.

Figure 1: Leonie Mills, Mullumbimby Circus Festival Opening Ceremony 2017. Image provided by and reproduced with the permission of Hamish McCormick, Carnival Cinema.

Founded in 1985 “to provide meaningful recreation and community engagement opportunities for disadvantaged youth in Adelaide’s inner west” (*Cirkidz* homepage), and having occupied various premises, the success of *Cirkidz* led to the provision of purpose built facilities. In 2013 *Cirkidz* moved into the space that is now known as the South Australian Circus Centre, a two-storey building with several training and rehearsal spaces, offices and a props workshop. Much like the *FFFC* space, the South Australian Circus Centre hosts local and touring companies in their creative developments and rehearsal needs alongside their large and successful youth circus program. *Gravity and Other Myths* was formed in 2009 by *Cirkidz* alumni, with the support of then Head Trainer Dan Aubin. They are now a globally renowned independent company touring nationally and internationally. They regularly return to their *alma mater* to develop new work and to conduct guest workshops with the current *Cirkidz* students.
Flipside Circus grew rapidly from a small community organisation holding classes in the park in the Brisbane suburb of West End, incorporated as a not-for-profit organisation in 1998 (Flipside homepage), to a well-established youth company with the largest circus space in Queensland. Their home base is now on the edge of Brisbane’s CBD. Formerly the Bonds clothing factory, it was transformed to open in April 2010 as a thriving circus space. In my role at that time as Head Trainer and then Artistic Director, I was there during this transition period, scrubbing the floors, painting the walls and installing the rigging. My experience suggests that the communities that form around youth circuses are a large part of their success. The renovation of the Flipside Circus space would not have been possible without the in-kind support of staff, students, their parents and siblings. It is a reflection of the kinds of communities that youth circus has the capacity to cultivate, reflecting a major strength of circus as an artform: its ability to bring people together. This clearly fuels the kind of growth that was seen in each of these examples of youth circus. What this produced at Flipside was another thriving space where local and visiting artists can train skills, develop their work and gain income from teaching. Flipside Circus has many successful graduates who have gone on to work in well-respected national and international companies such
as *Circa, Casus, Briefs Factory, Strut n Fret Production House, 7 Fingers* (Montreal) and *Cirque du Soleil*.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 3**: Jaimi Lurhmann, Flipside Circus and NICA graduate

Show: “Blanc de Blanc” by *Strut n Fret Production House*. Image provided by and reproduced with the permission of Hamish McCormick, Carnival Cinema

**Brisbane: nurturing independent circus companies**

Prior to opening their space in Alderley, from 2003 to early 2010, *Flipside Circus* shared residency of the Stores Studio at the Brisbane Powerhouse with *Vulcana Women’s Circus*. As mentioned earlier, Brisbane is considered one of Australia’s leading circus cities in Australia, and like its sister circus city Melbourne, it is considered a driver of contemporary circus on a global scale. Brisbane’s line of flight to becoming a leading circus city is similar to Melbourne’s, in that it began its trajectory with connections that loop back to alternative theatre and street theatre origins. As mentioned briefly in Chapter One, Brisbane’s contemporary circus sector began in the early 1980s with a community theatre project led by local community collectives, The Popular Theatre Troupe and Street Arts Theatre. Both companies had formed so as to produce a counter-cultural response to an extremely conservative period in Queensland politics, known after its Premier as the Bjelke-Peterson era.
The Bjelke-Peterson government held office 1968-87, and its extreme conservatism had a very negative impact on arts, culture and social structure. In turn, parts of the arts sector and the community supported a social ideology of radical reaction and political activism. This era of Brisbane’s community history was also affected by the fear of the impact of the development of the “Expo 88” site, involving the reclamation of a significant section of riverside in South Brisbane. People were concerned about its effect on housing prices and the social economy of the West End community where a large portion of artists resided and made work during this period. Fortunately, although the State Government was incredibly restrictive for Brisbane artists for almost two decades, the Federal Government was largely the antithesis. In *Challenging the Centre: Two decades of Political Theatre*, Steve Capelin describes the philosophy and politics of the Popular Theatre troupe and the opportunities that they had as a consequence of changes to arts funding under the Federal Whitlam Government (1972-5):

> The philosophy of the Popular Theatre Troupe set it apart from most other theatre groups at that time, in that there was a definite political motivation involved in mounting each of its productions. Because of the cultural vision of the Australia Council’s funding policies in the wake of the Whitlam expansion, we were enabled to say what we thought should be said about social and political issues which we considered important. We didn’t have to make box office the choice-determining concern that it was amongst bourgeois theatre companies. Context ruled. (Capelin, 1995, p.46)

With this artistic freedom, they were able to establish a strong and inclusive artistic community in West End.

Street Arts Theatre, which was the other driver of community theatre in Brisbane at that time, held a similar ethos and it wasn’t long before the two companies were working alongside each other. Street Arts Theatre had already established a connection to New Circus and saw it at as an essential part of community performance:

> Street Art’s founding members brought with them a belief in circus as an effective, all inclusive popular form of performance. Their own skills – influenced by Reg Bolton of Suitcase Circus fame, originally from the U.K. and now resident in Australia, and the New Circus and comedy movement centre in Melbourne – were combined with their desire to explore new popular theatre forms. (Capelin, 2004, p.104)

Founded by Pauline and Dennis Peel, *Street Arts Theatre* undertook its first project in 1983, when it facilitated country’s first Community Circus Festival, held in Musgrave Park, West End, Brisbane. The festival was well attended. It featured performances
from artists who would go on to become icons of the local and national contemporary circus sector, and to form companies that have strongly influenced the artform. Capelin describes how the process of festivals began to shape the culture of the arts community across the country and how this project, in particular, produced the first assemblage featuring some of the people that later became Rock n Roll Circus:

Here people who were to become key players in Street Arts had their first taste of community theatre. Tony Hannon, eccentric clown and whistle player later involved in community arts in Adelaide; Meg Kanowski, clown, comedian, writer, performer, director and company stalwart; Phil Davidson, acrobat and performer; Peter Stewart, musician, performer later musical director with the company; Derek Ives, schoolboy juggler, unicyclist and circus natural who has since worked with Rock ‘n’ Roll Circus and Circus Oz to mention but a few. All were part of the first Thrills’n’Splills Community Circus troupe which emerged from this project. (Capelin, 2004, p.104)

Over the next three or so years, Thrills n Spills Circus went on to create five more shows in this format, with an eclectic cast of amateur acrobats, community theatre artists and local musicians. They performed their work in parks, gardens, shopping malls and community halls – whatever space was available at the time. At this stage the work was predominantly ground-based in its circus skills so did not require the technical specifications of aerial apparatus, making it less complicated to find suitable venues. Capelin notes that Street Arts Theatre had always drawn participants who were interested in circus performance and that a groundswell to create an independent circus company grew rapidly from these participants. The community of West End, the vibrant character of the place and the people in it, contributed to the emergence of an artistic community creating new work that was community and politically driven. Despite extensive gentrification, West End is still perceived as a bohemian suburb with an alternative lifestyle embedded in its community, and many artists still choose to reside there. While working at Flipside Circus I lived for six years in West End and, as a place to live and a community to belong in, I found stark differences between it and the Gold Coast35, where I grew up. Coming from a city that (rightly or wrongly) was often described in the national media but also locally as a “cultural desert”, my time in West End opened out to me the power of communities and how in places where like-minded people bring their artistic skills together, subcultures form rapidly36.

35The Gold Coast is a tourist city about one hour south of Brisbane that is well known for its beaches, surf culture, nightclubs and theme parks. In more recent years, Gold Coast tourism promotion has also featured the rainforest hinterland and even cultural events.
36I returned to the Gold Coast in 2011 where I run my own circus school, Circus Stars, and formed a local contemporary circus company, The Circus Corridor. I have put a significant effort into community building through cultural activities, especially through circus. Of course, the city was never as devoid of culture as
As I have discussed earlier, the culture of circus produces spaces and communities that invite “outsiders” to belong without needing to alter their identities in order to do so. The spaces that house contemporary circus in Australia, from youth circuses to performance venues and festival sites, create communities that enable multiple belongings and, as a consequence, make multiplicities. As discussed in the previous chapter, the nomadic character of circus, its inclusivity and its celebration of chaos and eccentricity, generate a culture that encourages the circus community to advocate and support the overall growth of the artform.

Probyn (1996) describes the kinds of spaces where we might find belonging as functions of desire:

It is through and with desire that we figure relations of proximity to others and other forms of sociality. It is what remakes the social as a dynamic proposition, for if we live within a grid or a network of different points, we live through the desire to make them connect differently. (1996, p.13)

Looking to Foucault, she also describes how these spaces and the approximate belongings that we can find within them “press upon us”:

After all the spaces in which we seek belonging (“the spaces that claw and know at us”) “are not a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things” (Foucault, 1986: 23). The sights and sounds of the spaces in which I sometimes belong are integral to the ways in which I live and think belonging, the ways in which space presses upon us is in turn fashioned by our desires. (Probyn, 1996, p.10)

In thinking in this way, we could say that circus spaces allow communities to participate in the artform in a way that always already embodies belonging – there is an energy, a buzz, creative chaos, danger, risk, trust, all promised by the circus space, whether a training space or a performance space. Circus belonging is multi-faceted and is a product of the kinds of subjects occupying the spaces and how they feed into the stories-so-far of the artform.

The community of West End and the ecology that Street Arts developed as a company allowed circus to sit comfortably within the local setting. In interview Antonella Casella

37 it was represented. Its dispersed urban formation and over-emphasis on tourism obscured its equally dispersed cultural life. As the city has grown and matured, and as Griffith University's campus has expanded exponentially, the Gold Coast's cultural activity has intensified, but that activity remains scattered along the 65 kilometers of the strip city, with no identifiable “hubs” with the kind of intensity of interactions between arts and community that can still be found in West End.

37 Founding member of Rock n Roll Circus – as mentioned earlier – and of Vulcana Women’s Circus and now Senior Artistic Associate at Circus Oz.
described her involvement with Street Arts Theatre including the *Thrills n Spills Circus* show that would be the catalyst for the formation of *Rock n Roll Circus*:

The project had quite a long process and I think I arrived there about half way through that process. It all culminated in a show called “Rock n Roll Circus” at the Rialto Theatre in 1986. There were about 60 people in it, it was one of those massive community shows. It was basically this incredible community of young and emerging people who wanted to work in political activism or theatre and do it in a new way that was different from the traditional theatre model. Natalie Dyball and Donna Close from the *FFFC* came up for a week to train us and Natalie ended up staying for the rest of the process and ended up being in the show, so we had a *Fruit Fly* in the show. (Antonella Casella, Interview, June 2016)

Casella also noted that the show was highly political in its content, driven by the participants responding to the issues the community of West End was facing at that time. In association with the Expo ’88 initiative mentioned earlier, the mid to late 1980s saw a boom in property development around West End, raising issues of gentrification and housing affordability:

That show was actually quite blatantly political as well. It was about living in the community of West End. All of the performers in that show were all adults that were all heavily engaged in the local community and so as a result we had quite a lot of acts about the Dean brothers who were at that time demolishing buildings around Queensland. So the overtly political acts were in there alongside some really beautiful acts and some really silly acts. There was tight-wire, a flag diving act, all sorts of circus acts. It was an activist artist mob of West End. (Antonella Casella, Interview, June 2016)

Two years after that first show called “Rock n Roll Circus”, the company with the same name officially formed and began to forge itself into an alternative and artistically risky collective. As Casella shared with me, their connections to the national sector were developing as early as 1988, when they brought in *Circus Oz* artist Robyn Laurie as a guest director:

In 1988 is when it became a professional troupe, which was myself, Derek Ives, Chris Sleight, Lisa Small and the musician Ceri McCoy. We worked with those visual artists again on the first show as a professional collective, which again was called “Rock n Roll Circus” and was just an entertainment show. We brought Robyn Laurie up to direct that and it was very much in the vein of a *Circus Oz* show. In fact after we completed the very first community show with Street Arts in 1986, we had an afternoon after party at Pauline and Denis Peel’s place and they showed us a video of *Circus Oz*. I think they were trying to inspire us and show us what was already out there. So we didn’t reinvent the wheel in Queensland but we were most certainly inspired by what Oz were doing and had created. (Antonella Casella, Interview, June 2016)
Casella left the company in 1989, when she moved to London for a period of time to develop her circus skills and branch out artistically, and from then Rock n Roll Circus saw various artists transition through the company, each bringing their own spin on the creative process and aesthetic of the work. Artists such as Kareena Oates, Stephen Brown, Anna Yen, Sharon Weston, Mat Wilson and Annabel Lines joined the company alongside long-time members Derek Ives and Azaria Universe. Many of these artists had short periods of being involved or were in and out of the company. They were using spaces such as the St Andrews Church Hall in West End, The Princess Theatre and the Old Museum to create and perform their work. They were yet to set up residence in a dedicated space. Rudi Mineur joined the company in 1992 and describes the creative process as one that was both independent and restrictive, inasmuch that in being a mostly group-led artistic process, not having an assigned leader or artistic director, the process and progress for creating work was often slower:

We had certain skills that we liked and fed into the work but it wasn’t act driven. Training was focused around a creative idea, it was group driven. Not act driven – skill driven in some ways. We never really had a slapstick act, a handstand act, a juggling act, like most companies did back then. We had endless company meetings with long conversations, no one was the boss. And although that had its benefits, it was often difficult to make any decision. (Rudi Mineur, Interview, June 2015)

The company morphed and shifted in its artistic purpose and structure many times over the period 1988 to 2004. As mentioned in Chapter One, in 2004 a complete re-branding occurred when the company became Circa. Rock n Roll Circus was, however, a key player in enabling the development of dedicated venues for contemporary circus performance in Brisbane.

The Brisbane Powerhouse has been a key venue for arts and culture in Brisbane since it opened in 2000, and as such has frequently housed contemporary circus. More than this, as key players in the artistic life of the city at the time, Rock n Roll Circus, Vulcana Women’s Circus and Flipside Circus were the leading stakeholders in the redevelopment of the old power station into a thriving arts precinct, and they had a vested interest in including circus as a key artform within the venue’s artistic programming. Zane Trow, who was Artistic Director of the venue in its first phase, consulted with the local circus community to ensure that the venue had the correct

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38 I will discuss Rock n roll Circus’s progressions and its transition from an independent company to what is arguably one of the leading contemporary performance companies in Australia in Chapter Six, where I explore independent company structures and the increase of autonomous company formations.
infrastructure for circus performance, training and creation to occur. Brisbane-based circus artist Davy Sampford described the venue’s interactions with circus companies:

The Brisbane Powerhouse was supportive of the local circus sector right from the beginning. Particularly when they were still planning the build of it, they had circus in mind and Zane was overseeing the build. They built it so circus could happen in it and around it. And the Stores building, that was part of the initial planning. Then they really appealed to the circus industry to ask us all to apply for artistic programming and to be included in the venue. Rock n Roll Circus was an intrinsic part of the official opening. (Davey Sampford, Interview, July 2014)

The Stores Studio is a smaller warehouse adjacent to the main Brisbane Powerhouse theatre venue. With an impressively high ceiling, gantry and a warehouse aura, it makes an ideal circus training space. The venue was set up to become a permanent circus training venue through the inclusion of an ongoing residency program for the Vulcana Women’s Circus, which saw the installation of box truss rigging to extend the space’s capacity to hold aerial circus equipment. The residency provided Vulcana with a home base to run their workshop programs, to rehearse their artistic work and to develop their skills. In 2002 Flipside Circus were also invited to become a resident company in the stores studio, which allowed the then small, community-based youth circus to develop into a thriving company and leaders in youth arts.

During my time at Flipside (2004-2010) I witnessed first-hand the generous support from the Brisbane Powerhouse to its resident companies. For a large portion of Flipside’s residency they provided not only discounted space rental, but also in-kind rental and access to the main Brisbane Powerhouse Theatre, which enabled our youth circus company to produce artistic work of a high production level, escalating its reputation and providing its young artists with a hands-on professional performance experience each year. The support and advocacy from Brisbane Powerhouse was intrinsic to Flipside Circus’s rapid growth. As mentioned earlier, Flipside Circus moved out of the Stores Studio in early 2010, however Vulcana Women’s Circus remain a resident company and regularly host performances of their new works in the space, alongside their growing workshop program.

The Brisbane Powerhouse continues to support local contemporary circus not only through the Stores Studio space but also through its ongoing programming of local circus companies such as Briefs Factory and Company 2 in its annual artistic program.

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39 I explore the development of Vulcana Women’s Circus in Chapter Four, which focuses on women in circus.
The venue provides a major theatre space for circus performance, and has also encouraged performances of aerial harness work across the facade of the building. This style of aerial performance was introduced in Brisbane through the work of Celia White as artistic director of Vulcana. Celia previously worked extensively with Sydney company Legs on the Wall, who pioneered this style of aerial performance in Australia. At the Powerhouse, this influence has seen aerial artists floating and flying on, off and on top of the building. This has created opportunities for artists to explore site-specific work, and also showcased to local audiences the possibilities and vast artistic potentials of contemporary circus performance.

One year after the successful opening of the Brisbane Powerhouse another heritage-listed Brisbane building was repurposed to form a dedicated arts and culture venue, with circus central to its development. Taking its name from a poet who lived for thirty years in Queensland, The Judith Wright Centre for Contemporary Art opened in October 2001. Situated only 2.2 kilometres from the Brisbane Powerhouse, “The Judy”, as it is referred to by locals, was made possible through a state government initiative facilitated by Arts Queensland. The process of developing the centre included extensive consultations with several key arts organisations, one of which was Rock n Roll Circus. As a result, Rock n Roll Circus became a resident company and, now as Circa, remains in the venue, using the space to develop its work, run its circus training programs, house its administration and management staff and often to perform new works in the 300 seat theatre. Like The Powerhouse, the Judith Wright Centre has demonstrated ongoing support for the local circus sector, providing internships, residency programs, mentorship programs and opportunities for new works and works-in-progress from contemporary circus companies to be showcased in the venue.

Alongside the contemporary circus companies of Circa, Flipside Circus and Vulcana Women’s Circus, Brisbane has long boasted an ongoing and thriving scene for freelance circus artists, with a large number of independent circus practitioners residing in the city. The presence of these freelance artists has impelled rapid growth in independent companies. Since the inception of Strut n Fret Production House and Briefs Factory (see also Chapters Five and Six) Brisbane has seen an outstanding growth of successful independent companies such as Company 2 and Casus, which have gone on to tour successfully internationally. Brisbane is now frequently referred to as the largest circus city in Australia. This is not due to its geographical size, but to the fact that it hosts so many small companies that are key players in the international touring circuit.
Having worked as an artist in both Melbourne and Brisbane, Antonella Casella shared her perspective on the different rhythms of the two leading Australian circus cities. Throughout her career in the contemporary circus sector, she has been a key player in the growth of the artform and had ample opportunity to observe it in the two cities. She observes:

The Brisbane scene is very different from the Melbourne scene. I think because Brisbane’s circus industry came out of that community-focused and political practice of sharing ideology and way of working, that has really contributed to the way in which circus has developed in Brisbane. Whereas Melbourne came out of the alternative/radical theatre movement, the Pram Factory days... equally politically motivated but incredibly different ways of approaching making work in this artform. (Antonella Casella, Interview, June 2016)

Although Melbourne and Brisbane vary in their origins and differ in their output in terms of the varying aesthetics and sub-genres of contemporary circus, it is evident that the cultural “anchoring” of circus performance and circus training within these leading cities is central to their national and international standing. Moreover the circus identity that was secured within each city is undoubtedly tied to the spatiality of the cities themselves. Consistent opportunities and support from key venues/spaces, along with the architectural capacities of these cities, has forged an ongoing intensification of the sector of small to medium and independent companies and artists that live and work in both Melbourne and Brisbane, allowing a sense of belonging that flows consistently in the arts life of both cities.

Sydney: a site-specific circus city

Sydney is Australia’s most globally recognisable city. The aesthetic of Sydney’s spatiality as a city is world-renowned, most obviously for its harbour, with the architecturally dynamic bridge and the iconic Sydney Opera House. The city boasts influential and successful performance companies such as The Australian Opera, The Sydney Theatre Company, The Bell Shakespeare Company and Sydney Dance Theatre. Its creative ecology is rich with theatre, film and dance. However it has never really thrived as a circus city. A lack of availability of or access to venues that support circus is very much at the centre of why contemporary circus wasn’t able to set up the kind of belonging in the city of Sydney that occurred in Brisbane and Melbourne.

From the early days of contemporary circus practice, the spatiality of Sydney and the architecture of the city consistently lacked venues with the required technical capacity
for circus performance, such as high ceilings and exposed beams etc. The few venues with suitable structure and technical capacities were dominated by a high art theatre culture. In the earlier years of contemporary circus, this meant that it was not considered “suitable” to fit into the programming and curation of appropriate Sydney venues. Thus, contemporary circus was often pushed to the outskirts of the city, much like the nomadic, classical/traditional family circus that preceded it.

However, circus, being a resilient and adaptable artform, found a way to interpolate itself into the Sydney arts sector, using the limitations of the spatiality of the city as an inspiration to develop new forms. Although comparatively smaller in its contribution to the Australian contemporary circus sector than Brisbane and Melbourne, Sydney as a city has certainly made its mark on the cultural landscape of the artform. This has been most notably through the work of circus and physical theatre company *Legs on the Wall*.

Formed in 1984, then predominantly a street theatre company, *Legs on the Wall* soon began experimenting with extreme forms of physicality in their practice, which saw a vocabulary of circus skills becoming built into the physical language of their work. As mentioned above, *Legs on the Wall* are well known for their signature style of wall work which has seen them perform on major buildings in Sydney city including The Opera House, the AMP Building and the Queen Victoria Building as well as at high profile global corporate events such as the London Cultural Olympiad 2012 and Glasgow Commonwealth Games. However, in their very early days they struggled to find suitable venues which led to them creating work to fit into the limitations of the spatiality of the city. Celia White, who joined the company in those earlier days, describes the beginning of what was to become their signature style:

> It had been around for a couple of years before I joined. I was involved in a project with a group in Western Sydney in Fairfield, a big community project. So I was doing choreographic and circus stuff with them. And one of the members of *Legs on the Wall* was leaving and they wanted me to join, but I was already committed to working on the community project, so he and I swapped. I went to *Legs on the Wall* and he took over the community project. At that time as a company we were looking at influences beyond circus to create performance, so drawing on dance, theatre, wrestling, magic, the vaudeville repertoire. (Celia White, Interview, September 2015)

For the first 20 years of their existence, *Legs on the Wall* developed their work in shared venues, spaces where artists from other artforms such as dance and visual art were also making their work. This influenced their artistic process and the style of work
that they became well known for, a somewhat hybrid form of physical theatre with an influence of circus threaded through. One of these shared venues was an industrial area consisting of a series of what were then called “huts”. *Legs on the Wall* worked in Hut 24, a space with quite a low ceiling and minimal rigging capacity. I discussed this era in *Legs on the Wall* with their then director Gail Kelly. She explained how the limitations of the venues in which the company was working created constriction but also encouraged invention:

> We started talking about the potential to do theatre shows with circus skills in different ways, like, we weren’t ever going to own a tent, we didn’t have the money for that, and Hut 24 was a huge old ex-army hall. It was a tin Hut with a concrete floor, it was freezing in winter and in summer it was boiling and it wasn’t a very high ceiling. We didn’t really have access to any kind of sophisticated rigging, even if we were doing aerials, we had to work at quite a low height. We did some static trapeze and we did a little bit of lyra. But we couldn’t do aerial tissu or rope because of the lack of height, it was only about a five metre ceiling. We didn’t have anywhere else we could go so we had to be really inventive with what we could do as it was such a challenging environment, so that added to the invention side of the company. (Gail Kelly, Interview, November 2015)

*Legs on the Wall* have had multiple artistic directors over the past thirty years, however, it could be argued that Gail Kelly was instrumental in positioning the company as an important part of the cultural landscape of the city of Sydney, as well as influential in contemporary circus. Kelly has since held numerous roles in the sector as an artistic director, and, notably, as a long term director and leader of ACAPTA. In the latter connection she spent many years advocating and brokering for contemporary circus as an artform nationally and internationally. During her time at *Legs on the Wall* she demonstrated considerable artistic tenacity in challenging the perception among many Sydney cultural venues that circus was not a suitable fit for “high art” spaces. Celia White acknowledged Kelly’s contribution to a changing artistic process for *Legs on the Wall* and encouraging major venues to include contemporary circus and physical theatre in their programming:

> One thing that happened at the same time that I joined *Legs* was that Gail Kelly also came on board. Gail was very influential in the kind of work that *Legs* made at that time and I think that was what transitioned it from a street theatre company to a physical theatre company. We also kind of formulated the idea of ‘physical theatre’: it became a genre of how you made circus performance. The Performance Space in Sydney was the home of contemporary performance then and there was really a sense that circus did not belong in that space at that time. We made a show with Gail that featured Mick Conway’s (*Circus Oz*) band providing the music. It was the first circus show to kind of be ‘let into’ that space, to be considered as
a piece of contemporary performance. (Celia White, Interview, September 2015)

While this was certainly a turning point for the company, they were still struggling to make ends meet by generating enough work to exist as a sustainable entity. This urged them to challenge themselves to think beyond their existing repertoire to create work of a kind that had not yet been seen by Australian audiences. Prior to her time at Legs on the Wall, Kelly had worked internationally and had been inspired by various forms of site-specific work that she had encountered in England. Site-specific performance, as a genre, appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly in the European arts scene. The term “site-specific” refers to work that is created for a specific location that is not a venue/space in (or on) which traditional arts would be undertaken, for example botanical gardens, skate parks or in the case of Legs on the Wall, large city buildings with corporate associations or architecturally iconic status, or both.

While working in the U.K. Kelly was inspired by the work of Station House Opera, a company that was making site-specific work using aerial harness rigging on buildings. She describes how this became an element in Legs of the Wall’s artistic process:

So we talked about ‘how do we make this company work?’ and we thought well, we have the street stuff – the roving and street shows – and we were doing small shows in small venues because it was Sydney, and everything is a bit tougher in Sydney I reckon. Everything is more expensive and harder to access. I had been in England not that long before and I had seen all this work that I knew didn’t exist here, and there was a company over there called Station House Opera and they did all this work on buildings and I was like “hmmm...wow, could we do that?” It was just one of those absolutely crazy moments were I went “Why don’t we do that? Why don’t we do work on buildings? Because Sydney is a city, and it could be like an installation of performance art in a way.” And then one of the ensemble members had friends who were mountain climbers, and of course they were really good at rigging and safety, so we asked them if they thought we could do this and they told us yes we absolutely could. So they offered to work with us to design the aerial harness, the set up. (Gail Kelly, Interview, November 2015)

Thus, in responding to the limitations presented by the spatiality of their city (and the attitudes of some major cultural organisations) the company turned to new performance values and processes. The performers and crew took considerable artistic and physical risk to create work that the city could not avoid encountering. The performances frequently took place outside, on the walls of some of the largest and/or most important buildings in the Sydney CBD. Essentially Legs on the Wall was extending on its street theatre repertoire to encompass new strata of spatiality and in
Street performance interventions disrupt everyday activities in public spaces and challenge the status quo with propositions of alternative possible worlds. The artists encourage onlookers to break their routines, transgress accepted behavioural norms obeyed out of habit, and reclaim the city’s public spaces in performance events that blur the boundaries between actions that the spectators do in the fictional world of the performance and those they do in the actual world of the public space. (Haedicke, 2015, p.43)

Moreover, while placing performing bodies into public spaces already disrupts the order of that space, the kind of site-specific work that Legs on the Wall undertake, using the exteriors of buildings as their performance space and in many ways as their apparatus, can potentially change the stories that the architecture, and the city, currently tell. The performance of aerial bodies swinging and/or floating across buildings can change the meaning or presence of the site on which the work takes place. Haedicke puts it like this:

As an animate and mortal human body becomes a part of an inanimate building, that permanent structure seems to absorb the breathing body and respond to it. The buildings acquire a live-ness in the installations and the spectators’ imaginations, and this embodied text of the city acquires a performative quality that recognizes buildings as evolving stories or riddles. These encounters teach us how to think with, rather than about, architecture and so enable joint participation in creative processes that give rise to the surroundings we inhabit. (Haedicke, 2015, p.644)

As the buildings are used beyond their intended function, the aesthetic of the architecture of the city is transformed, and so is its meaning. For me as an aerial practitioner, one of the most remarkable examples of Legs on the Wall's work was the production of "Homeland". First performed in 1998, the narrative of the work was around the notion of migration and the struggles of settling into a new place. The work was originally performed on the side of the AMP building with five aerial performers in harnesses floating across the side of the 26 storey city structure, which was Sydney’s first skyscraper when it opened in the 1960s. Hanging up to 100 metres above the ground they performed acrobatic sequences (often while carrying suitcases) using a physical language to tell the stories of migration and change. Sepia toned vintage images of migrant families were projected onto the side of the building creating another layer to the story telling and spectacle of the work. “Homeland” was performed to live
music with Bulgarian song provided by world music ensemble “Mara!” who were set on the ground at the base of the building while the acrobats performed above them. Homeland was spectacle and site-specific performance on a grand scale, a performance that saw audience immersed in the work, with performance happening next to them (the music) and above them (the acrobats). The work was repeated for the Millennium celebrations of 2000, in that case also utilising parts of the Opera House roof. For Australians, Circular Quay, the site of the AMP building and the Opera House, has great significance as “Sydney Cove”, arrival point of the first white soldiers and convicts, but also, until well into the second half of the Twentieth Century, the arrival point for many hundreds of thousands of migrants who came to Australia on ships that docked in Sydney. As such, the “site-specific” aspect could hardly be more powerful in relation to the themes and narrative of the show. While the spectacle was breathtaking, the aspect of “Homeland” that those who saw it continue to remember was the emotional impact, the moving way in which the experiences of dislocation, separation, migration, alienation and identification were captured. The same site has also long been an ongoing focus for contestation in relation to the deterritorialisation/reterritorialisation of Indigenous Australia that accompanied settlement and has been a factor in Australian cultural life since 1788. Whose homeland/s were being evoked? What notions of “homeland” did the show raise for different members of this extremely multicultural society? And how were feelings of “home” disturbed?

In One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity (2002) Miwon Kwon discusses the importance of a work’s relationship to a site and how a work can alter the narrative of the site on which it is performed on:

> Beyond these dual expansions of art into culture, which obviously diversify the site, the distinguishing characteristics of today’s site-orientated art is the way in which the art work’s relationship to the actuality of a location (as site) and the social conditions of the institutional frame (as site) are both subordinate to a discursively determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate. Furthermore, unlike in the previous models, this site is not defined as a precondition. Rather, it is generated by the work (often as “context”), and then verified by its convergence with an existing discursive formation. (Kwon, 2002, p.26; emphasis added)

How does a performance such as “Homeland” change the way the audience sees the city, a particular part of the city, or indeed the nation? City dwellers who witnessed this show, who might normally walk past this long-established building without looking up, were transfixed by the building; they were, for the duration of the performance standing
still, focusing on the architecture and the complex histories/stories of the city and the nation through the performance of the human body in interaction with a building. Although site-specific work is in most cases temporally bounded, in that it is not an ongoing artwork but a one off or short series of performances, shows like “Homeland” have the potential to produce a temporary and for some, permanent rewriting of the city and/or the city space. Those who encountered the work are likely to recall it each time they pass by the building on which it was performed. They may even begin to see other city buildings as potential art spaces, with other narrative potentials, rather than merely towering concrete and glass slabs of corporate activity. The performance of the circus body in, or in this case on, an urban space changes the territory, creating a temporary space for art to occur.

West-Pavlov (2009) stresses how Deleuze and Guattari understand space as constantly in flux, and how that relates to maps and territories:

For Deleuze and Guattari, space is a fluid medium, a domain whose topography is one of constant flux, and it is out of this flux of becoming that bounded, mappable territorialities with identifiable coordinates emerge. Connections between domains of flow are the primary stabilizations by virtue of which territorialities come to being. (West-Pavlov, 2009, p.192)

“Homeland” was one of many works that Legs on the Wall performed on well-known buildings in Sydney city. In many ways, the company’s line of flight from the rupture in their practice assumptions caused by Gail Kelly’s “Why don’t we…?” moment, took up a belonging in the architecture of a city that at first seemed unfriendly to them and unable to provide them with a suitable venue. It was not only an artistic risk for the company to create such site-specific work, but also a physical risk for the performers each time they stepped off the top of a building in their harnesses to entertain the crowd below. Gail Kelly recalls the very first time that the company performed this kind of work and how anxious she was as a director about the degree of physical risk the artists were taking:

So we did some technical tests on walls and tested out all of the safety and creative capacity of the harnesses, using some abseiling techniques and so on. Then we got this gig on the Queen Victoria building and Angus Strathy designed the costumes: they were sort of like giant opera divas in style so it looked amazing. It came to the day of the gig and I was actually really terrified, because they had to jump from the building, from the height, and it was about four stories high which isn’t that high but for the first show you know! And we had done technical rehearsals, but we didn’t really jump, we did baby steps because everyone was quite confronted by the scale of it all, it was pretty scary. I trusted the rigger completely, we had an entire mountaineering team with us, but you know, it is that ‘you have to jump’
element, and you just never know. And I remember they came over the top of the building and I was like... holding my breath. There was no mat or anything, they were like a mobile floating in space or something! And they all did the performance perfectly but they all said that they were all absolutely ill with nerves while doing it. It was scary, but again it was new form! (Gail Kelly, Interview, November 2015)

Out of the risk that the company took, to literally launch themselves off buildings in a bid to create a new form and adapt to the spatial potential of their city, a signature style was created by Legs on the Wall that would see them perform their work not only in their home city, but also in many parts of Australia and the world. Kelly acknowledges the resilience of the artists and their bravery:

Circus takes courage and we just had to be courageous and go with it. And so we continued to refine the wall work until it was pretty much fool-proof. So then it became a technique, it became apparatus. It became their signature. When they got their new space ‘The Box’, it was purpose built for this work, it has the height, the flat walls and you can train on it! And I think “I wish we had that!! Imagine what we could have done with that!” But we just had to go with it and take risks to create it. (Gail Kelly, Interview, November 2015)

In their 20th year, 2004, with the support of NSW government funding, Legs on the Wall secured their own purpose built home, “The Red Box” in the inner suburb of Lilyfield. They finally had a home-base in which to train their techniques, and to create and perform their works. It could be said that the earlier restrictions of expensive venues, lack of venues with the technical capacity to house circus, or venues unfriendly to the idea of circus, resulted in a more limited presence of contemporary circus in Sydney than in Brisbane and Melbourne. On the other hand, those same restrictions are exactly what inspired Legs on the Wall to fly and walk on walls. The spatiality of the city of Sydney and its constraints, inspired the practitioners to take their work on new lines of flight. Rather than remaining limited, the company created its own now famously distinctive identity and aesthetic in the contemporary circus sector internationally.

Festivals

Australian circus on tour internationally

The majority of small to medium Australian contemporary circus companies, both funded and independent, consistently tour their work through the national and international arts festival circuits. In many ways this can be seen as an echo of contemporary circus’s links to the classical/traditional travelling family circus, with a
similar pattern of short seasons of shows that pack up and move on to the next festival city. The artists performing their work in festivals in multiple cities and towns across the world become “global citizens”, often returning to the same city at the same time each year, visiting the same restaurants and coffee shops, setting up a temporary belonging in each city that they perform in, connecting with other performers they connected with last time they were there. In this sense we could say that the touring Australian contemporary circus artist attains what Doreen Massey (1994) refers to as a “global sense of place”. She asks, “[h]ow, in the face of all this movement and intermixing, can we retain any sense of a local place and its particularity?” (1994, p.146). In exploring this issue, she alludes to the effect of “time-space compression” by which she is referring “…to movement and communication across space, to the geographical stretching-out of social relations, and to our experience of all this” (1994, p.147). Touring a circus show internationally produces this effect in that it provides artists with a global network and in many ways a global identity, or “global sense of place”. Although contemporary circus artists may identify as Australian, for the most part, those who are members of significant touring companies or who tour as independent artists, spend more time outside of Australia than within it.

For many independent contemporary circus companies – that is, those who do not receive ongoing government funding – the ability to tour their work consistently across the national and international festival circuit allows them to remain sustainable financially, to build their audience demographic and strengthen their position within the artform on both a national and international scale. The personal cost of this is that the majority of Australian companies, both funded and non-funded, often spend the majority of their time touring the festival circuits in Britain, Germany, France and Canada. The key international festivals programming Australian companies regularly are: Montreal Complètement Cirque, London Wonderground, Edinburgh Fringe Festival, London Underbelly Festival (sic), Glastonbury Festival and a range of smaller fringe-style festivals characteristic of the French and German scenes. The main companies touring consistently on an international scale are: Gravity and Other Myths, Acrobat, Briefs Factory, Casus, Company 2, Strut n Fret Production House and Circa, with many of these returning to the same city more than once in the same year, for

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40 It is worth reflecting on the problem of distance for Australian circus artists, indeed for all Australian performing arts companies working internationally. Australians tend to have to travel further in any year than artists from most other countries. They become very experienced travellers, and very adept tour schedulers.
example *Briefs Factory* have undertaken numerous tours to Berlin, programmed in festivals and in cabaret and theatre venues.

While undertaking a residency at École Nationale de Cirque and Cirque du Soleil in Montreal (June/July 2015) I had the opportunity to interview Marisol de Santis. As programmer at the circus dedicated venue La Tohu and agent for circus programming at the Montreal Complètement Cirque Festival, Marisol has seen many Australian contemporary circus companies and has chosen to repeatedly program them both at La Tohu and in the festival each year. I asked her what it is about Australian companies that she values and how these companies are perceived by a Quebecois audience. She responded,

> Australian companies are so technically good and we are in Quebec – we have this big national school and the public knows circus, they see a lot of it! And so we need to program companies that have the technique, who can manage an audience like that, and so with Australian companies we don’t have a problem knowing that they can deliver that skill level. (Marisol de Santis, Interview, Montreal, July 2015)

Marisol also spoke about the artistic qualities that make Australian work appealing not only to her as a programmer and agent, but also to the circus-educated audience in Montreal:

> I think you need to have the presence, and sometimes in circus, you have the technique, but not the presence. We have to nuance all of this, because yes, we are great in Quebec for technique, like 7 fingers and *Cirque Eloise*, but we need to see things, the public needs to discover other countries. Like the colour of *Circus Oz* is really, really special, it is unique. And the fun of *Gravity and Other Myths*, it’s really unique. And the polished precision of *Circa* is also unique. So the Montreal audience have to see this. (Marisol de Santis, Interview, Montreal, July 2015)

**Montreal Complètement Cirque**

With Quebec being home base to globally successful companies such as *Cirque du Soleil* and *7 Fingers*, and Montreal a hothouse of contemporary circus activity, there is obviously considerable prestige associated with being programmed at the Montreal Complètement Cirque. The festival’s ten-day program consists of a melting pot of the world’s best contemporary circus, from exciting emerging artists to well-established companies. It takes place in sites across the entire city, including street performance, site-specific spectacles, an open-air circus ring, circus workshops for the general public, performances in parks and gardens, in theatres and tents. For the duration of the festival it is nearly impossible not to encounter contemporary circus in some way. I
have attended the festival twice, during my residency in 2015 and again in 2016. On both occasions I walked around Montreal with a gaping jaw.

Circus is sited in expected and unexpected spaces, creating enormous potential for inventive spatial interventions and for audience development. In 2016, while walking down a main street looking for a coffee shop, I noticed a large group of people standing still staring up at the sky. When I paused and followed their gaze, I saw a tight-wire artist delicately balancing on one leg on a wire rigged about nine metres above a traffic intersection. No music, no introduction to announce his wire walk: he just commenced walking and those below who noticed stopped walking to admire his skill and courage as he calmly moved across the wire, performed several one leg balances, then returned to the ground.

Michel De Certeau (1984) argues that space is produced by the behaviours that regularly occur within it, “In short, space is a practiced place. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers.” (1984, p.119) Drawing on this, we can see that while the regular users of the street have transformed the “planners’ street” to establish it as another kind of space shaped by the flows of ordinary people, the tight-wire artist interrupts the usual flows of the street space with his performance above the street crowd. Those who usually define the spatial flows are temporarily transformed by a different intervention, and in the same moment, the everyday crowd becomes an audience in the temporary circus space created by the performance. For a moment in time, he shifts the flows of the space, of pedestrians walking their city, as he walks across a wire nine metres above them, causing the pedestrians to pause in their usual behaviour.

**Festivals and circus in Australia**

I am yet to experience in Australia a style of circus festival like Montreal Complètement Cirque. Although Australia has circus-specific festivals, none of them set out to bring circus to the public by transforming a city with circus. Rather, they are just as focused on serving the needs of the circus industry as on entertaining the public. Australia’s

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41 This once again deploys the kind of distinction between place and space that Massey (2005) critiques, albeit that for de Certeau place becomes space as a consequence of human interventions, in an opposite direction to the more familiar “space becomes place”. Massey includes de Certeau with Bergson, Lefebvre and other important spatial thinkers, when she remarks that “one way and another, then, all of these authors equate space and representation” (2005, p.26). Still, de Certeau does apprehend flux, transformation as a feature of space, even as he works with a distinction between spatiality and temporality.
dedicated circus festivals, Tasmanian Circus Festival, Western Australian Circus Festival and The Mullumbimby Circus Festival, are all formatted to run for a one or two week duration beginning with an intensive week of circus skills training for professionals and amateurs. The training intensive is usually followed by a three day program of performances open to the general public. The style of circus festival programming means that the circus festivals in Australia are predominantly attended by the circus industry itself with a smaller proportion of the general public in attendance. This is not to say that one style of circus festival is more desirable than another. The value of the Australian circus festival format is that acts as an effective means to connect the sector, to provide professional development to artists and to offer a space to showcase works in progress to an educated audience of artistic peers. However, what this doesn’t do is transform an urban space into a circus space and thus intensify the opportunity for an established circus city to be celebrated by its own citizens and also benefit from an influx of visitors – circus as urban cultural development and cultural tourism initiative.

Figure 4: Mullumbimby Circus Festival 2017

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42The Tasmanian Circus Festival, founded by Tony Rooke in 1991 and ran consecutively for over 20 years and was possibly the largest circus festival in Australia. It had a short hiatus (2015-16) and has since recommenced in a new location in Tasmania.
There are, though, many other opportunities in Australia for contemporary circus to gain profile through touring and thus increase audience development. These opportunities are largely associated with arts festivals. Most major arts and cultural festivals around Australia are now programming local and international contemporary circus companies, with some festivals curating circus-specific elements of their festival as drawcards. In 2017 the Sydney Festival, which previously had quite sparse programming of circus, held a dedicated focus on the artform with a “Circus City” initiative featured in the program. The “Circus City” in fact consisted of a substantial two week line up of contemporary circus shows, circus industry panels and mini conferences, housed in a series of circus-tent-style venues on one major site in Parramatta. Melbourne Festival, Brisbane Festival and Perth Fringe Festival have all increased their circus programming significantly over the past four years with audiences now expecting circus as a key element in their programs.

Figure 5: Mullumbimby Circus Festival 2017

43 Parramatta has long been a city in its own right and is also the rapidly expanding urban hub for Western Sydney. Due to the ongoing march of urban sprawl and population density to the south-west, west and north-west of the Sydney basin, Parramatta is now the geographic centre of greater Sydney.
However, the Adelaide Fringe Festival is by far the most significant in successively programming contemporary circus over many years. As an accompanying event to the internationally significant Adelaide Festival of Arts, The Adelaide Fringe began in 1960, initially as a biennial event. The Adelaide Fringe Festival grew rapidly and, having become an annual event in 2007, is considered the second largest fringe festival in the world. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, since the early days of Circus Oz The Adelaide Fringe has been a strong supporter of and advocate for the Australian contemporary circus sector. It has become a very important node in the contemporary circus festival tour circuit for both local and international artists. Often coinciding with international arts market events where producers and programmers from all over the world come to hand-pick their “next big thing”, the Adelaide Fringe creates more than a performance opportunity for artists, since it also offers prospects for artists and companies to grow their work and connect to the global performing arts scene. In “Festivals, artists and entrepreneurialism: the role of the Adelaide Fringe Festival”, an analysis of the festival’s impact on the capacity of artists to participate in the cultural economy, Jo Caust and Hilary Glow (2011) demonstrate the professional development opportunities provided by the festival, observing that “The Fringe can be seen as a launching pad for careers, as an opportunity to produce innovative work, to showcase product and as a commercial market for producers seeking on-selling opportunities” (2011, p.8). The Adelaide Fringe has rapidly become a hub for contemporary circus activity, with circus-dedicated venues appearing more and more each year in the festival’s ever-expanding programming and site innovations.

*The Garden of Unearthly Delights*

One venue, in particular, has contributed more than others to this increase in the representation of contemporary circus and the extensive audience development for it that has become part of the Adelaide Fringe Festival. Since its establishment in 2000, a large-scale carnival venue, called The Garden of Unearthly Delights, has become an ongoing feature of the Fringe. Programming local and international circus acts of the highest calibre, The Garden of Unearthly Delights has grown significantly and won multiple awards. The venue was created by Strut n Fret Production House, a then Brisbane-based company, which took a leap of faith to create its own space within the Fringe Festival. *Strut n Fret Production House* are producers and artistic directors of

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44The largest fringe festival is said to be the Edinburgh Fringe Festival which runs in August annually.
some of Australia’s most innovative and successful touring contemporary circus shows such as “LIMBO”, “Feasting on Flesh”, “The Happy Sideshow”, “Cantina”, “Tom Tom Crew”, “Blanc de Blanc” and “Fear and Delight”. With The Garden of Unearthly Delights, the company is also renowned as creating and curating one of the largest circus-carnival style venues in Australia.

The spatiality of The Garden of Unearthly Delights is paramount to the performances that occur within it. Situated inside the Adelaide Botanical Gardens, which are located in the centre of Adelaide, the arrangement of the space suggests that anything can and will occur. There is no fee for spectators to enter The Garden, although tickets fees are required for the shows that they can experience once they are within the parameters of the main venue. The spectators arrive through a main gate at the top of the Botanical Gardens, leaving the reality of the city behind, and are at once encompassed by live music, street performers and various sub-venues. The Garden of Unearthly Delights consists of several circus tents – a Spiegel tent, a contemporary Big Top, and two vintage wooden tents – as well as several outdoor spaces created by the use of rigging truss and industrial containers. The atmosphere is carnivalesque, with festooned lighting and fairy floss stands alongside contemporary food trucks scattered among the performance venues. Circus, sideshow, live music, comedy, puppetry, theatre and spectacle all find their place.

Strut n Fret Creative Director Scott Maidment spoke with me about the impact of the venue and how audiences often return year after year, and sometimes to see the same show:

The Garden started in 2000. It’s just been one of those things. It’s been a circus hub. And the success of the Garden in Adelaide has influenced other festivals and venues to program circus. It has definitely developed an audience. “LIMBO” has played The Garden for 3 years consecutively as did the “Tom Tom Crew”, to sell-out audiences each season. They expect it and there is a large return demographic for audiences. (Scott Maidment, Interview, November 2015)

The Garden not only provides the city of Adelaide and its visitors with a space that is something of a parallel universe during the Adelaide Festival and the Adelaide Fringe Festival, but also programs work that is edgy and at times confronting – from exotic to grotesque, burlesque to sideshow. In doing so The Garden brings together a large cross-section of the world’s best and most exciting contemporary physical performers, creating a melting pot for the quirky and the eccentric in a major industry gathering.
Here it is useful to draw on Foucault’s work on heterotopias, or places/spaces characterised by multiplicity and difference. In “Of Other Spaces” he writes:

Opposite … heterotopias that are linked to the accumulation of time, there are those linked, on the contrary, to time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect, to time in the mode of the festival. These heterotopias are not oriented toward the eternal, they are rather absolutely temporal [chroniques]. Such for example, are the fairgrounds, these marvellous empty sites on the outskirts of cities that teem once or twice a year with stands, displays, heteroclite objects, wrestlers, snake women, fortune tellers, and so forth. (Foucault, 1986, p.26)

Of course it is important here to note that in many ways circuses are themselves heterotopic on several axes or plateaus or strata. They are nomadic spaces populated by a wide range of creative, skilled and eccentric people who perform different roles and different acts in different combinations, yet they are largely continuous as performance companies and as communities. They are, however, entirely transitory in relation to the other places/spaces in which they appear for a single performance or for a few days or weeks, bringing their eccentricities to disrupt, attract, entertain and astonish the continuities of the community into which they temporarily irrupt. That is, circuses are heterotopic in terms of subjectivities, situations, temporality and spatiality, and their heterotopic characteristics vary depending on whether one is located within a circus company, or a visitor to one which is visiting one’s locale. And with the added layer of the heterotopic space of the festival setting as its venue, circus as an artform then further develops its capacity to be “other” and its ability to suspend time.

The Garden has programmed companies such as Gravity and Other Myths, Briefs Factory, Company 2, Casus, La Soirée and a long list of independent circus artists from all over the world. By placing this multiplicity of the international circus sector into one large venue for four weeks, new networks unfold through artists seeing and supporting each other’s work, and collaborations are often seeded. This arises not only from the co-locality of shared space, it is also a line of flight from the kind of space that is being produced and shared. The heterotopic energy of The Garden, then, becomes a milieu that nurtures/impels collaboration, experimentation, intensification, ruptures, lines of flight and growth, creating new nodes in the rhizomic connections across the national and international circus sector.

The rhythm or flow of the design of The Garden provides a space where experimental and often dark work is programmed and performed, sometimes being “test-driven” before embarking on international tours. Alongside the antique and boutique tent
venues and industrial containers, are old-fashioned carnival rides such as Ferris wheels, dodgem cars, and a sideshow pavilion, where world records are often attempted by Australian sideshow artist Space Cowboy. He brings his personally curated collection of oddities to The Garden in the form of a “mutant barnyard” that sits comfortably next to a merry-go-round and popcorn stall. The mutant barnyard is a collection of two-headed taxidermy animals and historical freak-show artefacts that straddle the affective spectrum, being both fascinating and confronting for audiences. The enthusiasm and tenacity of the Space Cowboy’s guided tour of the mutant barnyard provides insight but can provoke horrified reactions from some visitors. Challenging any conventional perception that entertainment’s role might be to make you feel warm and fuzzy, The Garden has the capacity to render its audience uncomfortable, inviting it to embrace the grotesque, to encounter the extraordinary.

Kwon discusses James Meyer’s concept of a “functional site” with reference to site-specific work that occurs in spaces in which the artist creates a “nomadic narrative” to set up the order of how that space is consumed, “[w]hich is to say, the site is now structured (inter)textually rather than spatially, and its model is not a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of events and actions through spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist” (2011, p.29). Although Scott Maidment and his creative team are the curators of the kinds of artistic experiences that are programmed into The Garden, it could be argued that it is the artists who occupy that space who make it a “functional site” in that they are responsible for creating or delivering the nomadic narrative that the audience experiences as they move through the space, encountering each performance and moment of spectacle. Due to its festival setting The Garden attracts not only arts audience regulars but also locals who may not usually consume contemporary circus performance at any other time in the year. They might stumble across the venue and unintentionally become audience. This brings audience development to the artform and reminds those of us who are performers in the space that audiences encounter The Garden in vastly different ways to how we might. A circus artist encounters the space as an extension of his or her existing daily world, but in a more intensified fashion. For artists, it is seen as a place for artistic development, networking, showcasing and sometimes a bit like a working holiday. For the audience, whether planned or spontaneous, it is perhaps an escape into a world of the “other”, a place to be entertained, appalled, to subvert reality, to switch off and indulge.
Elizabeth Grosz explains how our relation to space and the objects occupying space effects not only how we receive space, but how we influence the space we occupy:

The subject’s relation to space and time is not passive: space is not simply an empty receptacle, independent of its contents; rather, the ways in which space is perceived and represented depend on the kinds of objects positioned ‘within’ it, and more particularly, the kinds of relation the subject has to those objects. Space makes possible different kinds of relations but in turn is transformed according to the subject’s affective and instrumental relations with it. (Grosz 1995, p.92)

Our relations to the contemporary circus spaces we occupy as audiences or artists affect how we navigate through the performance space and how we receive and build upon the stories that are produced by and generate within these spaces. Contemporary circus, particularly in its festival setting, provides multiple becomings to the spaces with which it engages, and in turn, the interactions between circus, spaces and becomings make multiplicities.
Chapter Three: The legacy of the Nanjing Project

Training Australian circus bodies

In the previous chapters I have begun to explore how the lines of flight that have come to constitute the rhizomics of Australian contemporary circus move across time and across spaces. Given the centrality of the body to the artform, those rhizomics also move across, with and through the bodies of circus artists.

Initially, Australian contemporary circus did not demonstrate a particularly high level of skill, due to a lack of availability of formal circus skill training that could help artists to develop their bodies to a high standard. As mentioned earlier, Micky Ashton, a member of a key classical/traditional circus family, provided invaluable training for the Flying Fruit Fly Circus in its early years. However, for the most part contemporary circus artists taught themselves, individually and collectively: they collaborated in skill sharing, they read books, they experimented with skills without much technical knowledge of apparatus.

A very significant turning point for circus skills and apparatus development came in the form of the Nanjing Projects I and II. These were short-term residential workshops involving circus skill training in the techniques of classical Chinese circus. Participants attended daily training sessions with guest trainers from the Nanjing Circus troupe. The sessions incorporated foundational skills such as handstands and basic tumbling as well as speciality apparatus training such as hoop diving, object manipulation, aerial acrobatics and group bike.

Nanjing I took place in Albury Wodonga and began in November 1983. Participants consisted of FFFC youth participants, Circus Oz artists and a large cross-section of community and independent circus artists from various parts of Australia. It was made financially possible through a combination of government support and philanthropic sponsorship and had an estimated cost of $100,000 (Farrell, 2008). The project came about as a result of the networking and the tenacity of Carillo Gantner. A prominent theatre director from Melbourne with an ongoing relationship with Asia, he brokered with both the Chinese and Australian Governments for a cultural exchange based in circus. In an interview with Gantner “Looking closer afield: Carrillo Gantner on Australian theatre and Asia” (1999), Peter Copeman uncovered the complexity of the process that made Nanjing I possible, including the resistance that Gantner originally encountered:
When I first talked about that idea here, people said it was crazy: (a) we don't have a circus tradition like that, (b) our kids wouldn't be interested, and (c) they couldn't speak Chinese. Too difficult, too expensive. The attitude of the Ministry of Culture in Beijing was similar. But for three years, over a series of meetings, here and in China, we put the project together with the Fruit Fly Circus, which was growing each year, and with Circus Oz, and eventually we got funding from the Australia-China Council, from the Australia Council for the Arts, from the Victorian and New South Wales Arts Ministries. The Myer Foundation paid part of the cost for Circus Oz, who moved up and camped at the Albury Wodonga showgrounds for three months while they did this training. We took over a gymnasium at Wodonga, and the Chinese artists were accommodated in a couple of houses that belonged to the Albury Wodonga Development Corporation. (Gantner in Copeman, 1999, p.32)

Gantner had first encountered the Nanjing Acrobatic troupe when he worked as the tour manager for the troupe's tour of Australia in 1980. At that time he had established an ongoing relationship with the Asian arts sector and saw the potential in an exchange. During this period cross-cultural exchanges were encouraged by the federal government and, being well-connected, Gantner was in a position to make such an exchange a reality. Rosemary Farrell discusses Gantner's advocacy in her PhD dissertation *Sweat from the Bones* (2007):

Gantner was an advocate of the alternative theatre movement, having trained and worked with alternative theatre, community theatre and new circus practitioners in Australia (Gantner 2004). It seems this training and experience provided Gantner with the insightful perception that Australian new circus practitioners could learn new skills through a training project with professional Chinese Acrobats from China. (Farrell, 2007, p.146)

As predicted, there were some issues at the very beginning of Nanjing I, the main problem being a discrepancy between the Nanjing circus trainers' expectation regarding what they had planned to implement and the actual skill level of the participants. In interview, Master Trainer Guang Rong Lu spoke about the culture shock the Nanjing acrobats encountered when the Nanjing I training project first begun. Mr Lu and his team quickly realised that there was a vast difference in the approach to circus training and creation in Australia compared to China. The majority of the Nanjing I participants came from radical theatre and community theatre backgrounds, and many had no formal circus training. Those who did, certainly didn't have skills at the level to which the Chinese were accustomed. As Mr Lu put it:

When we first were coming here, a long time ago, we planned a very high standard, high level of training to bring here. The equipment we would bring would inform the skills we would be teaching, so different apparatus linked to different body functions. So when we came here, we had not yet
immediately realised that we were not necessarily working with professional circus artists, they were focused on having a good time, to use circus as a tool to enhance the confidence of the individual and then to the professional. So they crossed the board of recreational and professional. (Guang Rong Lu, Interview, November 2015)

Many participants were also somewhat shocked at the beginning of the project in terms of the intensity of the training that the Nanjing circus trainers set out to implement and the expectation that they would already hold a high skill level as participants. Given their predominantly theatre-based backgrounds, they did not have a deep knowledge of acrobatic technique and training methods. Celia White remembers her time as a Nanjing I participant, noting the high level of expectation from the Chinese trainers:

It was really full on, quite shocking. None of us could hold a handstand, let alone hold one for a minute. The Chinese were like “Circus!? You people know nothing”. (Celia White, Interview, September 2015)

Mr Lu very quickly realised that while the Chinese took a highly technical and skill orientated approach to training, the Australians were more attentive to artistic and creative potentials, with a focus on community outcomes. He sought the common ground:

So right from the beginning I realised that there was a really different approach. So after that, after we bring all of the equipment here and we started talking to the Australian participants and I started to hear some key words: confidence, community, I started to realise that Australia was very much about the application of the skill. So not necessarily can they do one finger handstands. But the importance is that from very young childhood, with training, a young child that cannot do anything… can even do a free handstand\(^{45}\), and that creates for that child confidence and identity! (Guang Rong Lu, Interview, November 2015)

At that time, with no formal training institutions for circus in Australia, skills were still “passed on” rather than taught in a formal structure. Classical family circus companies, such as Ashton’s, Burtons and Lennon Brothers, passed on their skills through the tradition of handing them down within the extended family, from generation to generation. By contrast, “new” or contemporary circus artists often developed their skills through playing together in theatre spaces and parks or looking at photographs of other companies doing skills and endeavouring to emulate them. Celia White remembers doing this often during the early part of her career at Legs on the Wall:

\(^{45}\) A free handstand is one that is held without support or spotting from a wall or a trainer
However as we were all already a very connected community network of artists, when it came to making the performance, that was where our skills came out. And with what the Chinese saw as our extremely limited circus skills, we created things that blew them away. There were no circus schools back then. For example, when I was with Legs on the Wall, we would look in books at acro-balances and talk about ‘I wonder how they get into that? How do the mechanics of that trick work?’ I remember we were once working on this four person balance we saw in a book and we were struggling and struggling to work it out, and then we had one session with Mr Lu in Albury and it was like bing! We got it! But still, at that time those opportunities were very, very rare. So you had no choice but to be as creative as possible when you were putting your performance together. (Celia White, Interview, September 2015)

Mr Lu’s recognitions and Celia White’s analysis both underscore that at that point in the artform’s development, acrobats often created work from an artistic concept first, rather than beginning with a skill base or specific apparatus. In the early stages of contemporary circus performers excelled in the artistic application of a skill rather than the technical execution of a trick. Companies such as Circus Oz were originally more focused on exploring a political and social identity in their work and, as mentioned earlier, often drove their creative practice from an ideological perspective. The 1970s, when these companies formed, was a more radical time for political activism in the arts, not just in Australia, but around the world. Mr Lu understood this after seeing Circus Oz perform:

I started to realise when I started to watch people perform, for example watching a Circus Oz show, which was very much political at that time, that the application of the skill is not necessarily about the skill itself. But you execute the skill at different levels: amateur level, community level, families training together levels, across to the professional level or across to a friction of political orientation. (Guang Rong Lu, Interview, November 2015)

Although the Australian Government had been initially resistant to idea of Nanjing I, Prime Minister Bob Hawke did not regret the decision to fund the project and later acknowledged its success. However, Farrell recalls how, in supporting funding for Nanjing II, Hawke didn’t appreciate the ongoing vitality of classical/traditional family circus in Australia at that time, nor did he seem to grasp that the Chinese projects were in fact assisting the development of a “new” and highly contemporary form of circus. Farrell writes:

The Australian federal government recognised the benefits of Chinese acrobatics to Australian new circus skills by the end of Nanjing I. Prime Minister Robert Hawke identified Nanjing I as a revitalisation of Australia’s nineteenth-century ‘fine popular tradition in the acrobatic arts’ which skills had ‘atrophied’ over time (Hawke 1985). Australian circus acrobatics had
not actually atrophied, as suggested by Hawke. While this is an inaccurate representation of traditional circus, this argument was used by Hawke to justify continued government financial support for Nanjing II. (Farrell, 2007, pp.144-145)

Gantner, on the other hand, had a very clear understanding of the significance of the emerging artform and the impact of the Chinese training on its professional potentials. In supporting Nanjing II, he once again made a significant contribution to the future of contemporary circus in Australia and, as it transpired, internationally. Nanjing I and II provided the artists and the industry as a whole with a boost in professional development through greatly enhancing the technical prowess that skill training was expected to deliver.

This further supported the artistic outcomes of the ensembles and individuals who underwent the training, adding another layer to the work, developing the extent of artistry available to the circus body. White stresses that the Chinese method of technical training of the skill of group acrobatics enabled her and her colleagues at the time to enrich their physical language in order to become a more finely tuned element within the creative process. And although the Nanjing trainers adjusted their original plans for how they would approach teaching the participants to accommodate existing skill levels, the daily training sessions were nevertheless rigorous, labour intensive and incredibly physically taxing. Many participants recall the soldierly drills that the Nanjing trainers used, with a focus on repetition and precision of technique and application. In “Nanjing Project: Chinese Acrobatics, Australian New Circus and Hybrid intercultural Performance” (2008) Rosemary Farrell explains that, “[t]he adult participants described training in straight lines up and down the training space, giving basic training the appearance of ‘militarystats’, and photographic evidence bears out distinct similarities to basic martial arts training” (2008, p.189).

This warm up, now often referred to by Australian contemporary circus artists as “Chinese kicks”, has been appropriated into training facilities and circus schools across the country and into the personal warm up routines of many Australian circus artists, myself included. This is a reflection of the ripple effect of Nanjing training. I did not undergo formal training with Mr Lu directly, however I did train alongside acrobats who did, therefore picking up on techniques such as this and applying them not only to my own practice, but also in my teaching. The influences of this particular Chinese circus method are yet another illustration of the rhizomics of the artform, its capacity to spread in various ways, breaking off and starting up in other places. The skills and techniques taught in the Nanjing projects have moved across the artform via all kinds of flows and
dynamics that can most readily be understood through Deleuze and Guattari. Experimenting with the idea of mapping this aspect of Chinese training in sectoral activity in terms of rhizomic movements, if we look at the milieu, the middle of the form after Nanjing I & II, emergent formations can be seen to arise within and between companies and training contexts directly impacted upon by Nanjing training (especially Circus OZ and FFFC), while at the same time individual artists move out from those formations to impact on other companies and training contexts. Assemblages can be detected among all of these, within which intensities build which can rupture that assemblage to take off on new lines of flight, which themselves frequently also loop back to earlier Nanjing practices. Thus there is a dynamic scenario of intensities forming, and rupturing to provide lines of flight that connect circus bodies rhizomically across the sector. As Deleuze and Guattari remind us, “[a] rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles” (1987, p.7). The connections to Nanjing certainly didn’t cease with the completion of the second Nanjing project. The movements just described mean that the relationship to Chinese circus training has become something more – something richer, permanently present and always changing – that continues to thrive in Australian contemporary circus.

Mr Lu chose to stay in Australia, taking on the position of Head Trainer at the FFFC, where he worked for over a decade. He then became head of circus training at NICA when it opened in 2000, influencing further generations of acrobats in their technical training. Many participants in the Nanjing Projects and students from Mr Lu’s time at FFFC went on to become circus trainers themselves. This process of succession continually reinforces and extends the connections of Chinese training methods and apparatus knowledge into other circus schools across the country. Rigorous Chinese approaches to training have thus become part of the milieu, characteristic of the in-between or middle that impels the impressive technical proficiency obvious across the various manifestations of the Australian sector, no matter how embedded or tenuous the connections might be between certain companies and artists.

A further perspective on this influence can be found in the notion of the refrain discussed earlier both in relation to how Deleuze and Guattari work with ideas about territoriality and milieus, and in relation to aesthetics. In both of those connections I

46 Rather than, for example, “network theory”, which implies a more organised set of connections that can be “applied” from the outside, rather than understood as continually emerging inside the praxis, such that the milieu gives rise to the rhizomes.
stressed the refrain in the sense that in any continuous becoming there are returns, echoes, repetitions that produce rhythms as movements-between. It is equally useful to understand the legacy of Chinese training by drawing on Bonta and Protevi’s (2004) explanation of a refrain as, “a block of content’ that serves as the organizing principle for a territory – that which in the territory establishes a link or bond between a body or an assemblage and the Cosmos, earth, and/or milieu” (2004, p.133). In terms of the movements of the highly trained circus bodies of trainers and top performers around the sector – sharing skills with other professionals, passing skills on across generations of artists and future trainers, and/or moving into new situations as part of touring companies – as well as in terms of the many risks daily taken by circus bodies in training and performance, it is helpful to consider those bodies as carrying the refrain, much as a songbird or a whale, might do, between territories. As Bonta and Protevi put it, “[a]ny body, possessing a refrain, can use this refrain as protection as that body wanders out on ‘lines of drift’: the refrain becomes the sonorous shell of the body, and accompanies it through whatever relative de- and reterritorialization it undertakes”.

“The refrain”, they add, “not only creates and holds territory but also becomes the motif or repeatable theme of a landscape” (2004, p.133).

So – I have indicated the extent to which the apparatus and techniques in Australian contemporary circus that are derived from the ongoing presence of Chinese circus training, form and maintain connections across the artform, emulating an organising principle or territory, thus creating an assemblage that represents a signature style for the artform. It contributes to making artists and companies recognisably “Australian” despite the differences between the artistic aesthetics created in their various works. Simultaneously, it is very important to remember Mr Lu’s early recognition that his approaches would need to change if he was to provide effective training for these Australian circus artists, many of whose primary concerns were both artistic and informed by radical politics of resistance. As Mr Lu’s influence has been picked up and worked with by other trainers and performers, they have added their ways of working to the basic repertoire, while also appreciating every opportunity to return to the “master”, spend time with Mr Lu or work with his graduates. That is, Chinese training in the Australian sector has itself been expressive of a continuous becoming, adding responsive elements to the refrain – a kind of call and response model, very familiar in the territorial and mating calls of many songbirds (and the whipbird) across the range of habitats in the Australian landscape. There is variation in consistency and consistency in variation:
The matters of expression themselves must present characteristics making this taking on of consistency possible. We have seen that they have an aptitude to enter into internal relations forming motifs and counterpoints: the territorializing marks become territorial motifs or counterpoints, the signatures and placards constitute a “style”. These are the elements of a discrete or fuzzy aggregate; but they become consolidated, take on consistency. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.329)

The refrain continues to impact on the industry as the next cohorts of performers leave the circus schools and move into the contemporary circus industry as emerging professional artists, taking its influence with them and using it in their own style to create new work. And although their work will be aesthetically different, the common ground of Chinese influence in terms of apparatus and technique still remains visible no matter how much the circus skills are segmented, ruptured and reconfigured in the creation contemporary performances.

There is, then, a strong argument to be made that Nanjing I and II became major elements in the milieu that has produced, and continues to produce, the rhizomies that are so integral to the becoming of Australian contemporary circus as an internationally recognised artform characterised by great technique, consistent skill levels, risk, edginess, creative aesthetics and that distinctive “Australianness” that Marisol de Santis referred to as “colour”, “fun” and “polished precision” (see Chapter Two above).

In Performance and Cosmopolitics: Cross-cultural transactions in Australasia (2009) Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo discuss the impact of this cultural exchange between Asia and Australia and note its lasting impact on the contemporary circus sector:

The intensive training led to the development of a shared understanding of circus arts for the Australian sector as a whole and a common acrobatic language based on the classical Chinese style. While some of the stylized acrobatic forms introduced by the Chinese have been adapted and transformed by the circus community into acts that are more ‘organically’ Australian, particularly in light of the subsequent influences from Russia and France, there is little doubt that the Chinese input contributed significantly to the professionalization of the industry. (Gilbert and Lo, 2009, p.98)

Nanjing I and II brought highly technical training of circus bodies to strengthen and enhance the values and creativity already established in the sector. It could be said that the Nanjing projects deterritorialised-and-reterritorialised aspects of what was at the time an emerging sector, that had already appropriated elements from classical/traditional circus, radical theatre and street theatre. Through this series of rhizomes, in particular, an “Australian” style developed. Beyond the similarities and
differences of its various aesthetics and styles, what gives Australian contemporary circus its signature as “Australian” are the movements and energies presented in the work.

Circus Oz probably demonstrates the most consistent influence from the Nanjing projects with acts such as hoop diving, group bike, group pyramids and Chinese Pole reoccurring in many of its shows. However, the influence was also particularly apparent in the work of independent artists such as the late (and great) Derek Ives who attended Nanjing as a teenage participant. Farrell uses Ives's work as an example of the hybridisation of intercultural performance in contemporary circus:

In 2007 at the Melbourne Fringe Festival, Derek Ives ended his character-driven one-man physical theatre performance Bucket of Love with a wine bottle thrown into the air and onto the spike of a closed umbrella, supposedly causing it to open and the bottle to spill water – rain – over the arching ribs. This wine bottle and umbrella act is a traditional Chinese acrobatics act brought to Australia in 1983 by a group of Chinese acrobats from the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe. (Farrell, 2008, p.186)

Ives passed this trick on to some of his peers that he mentored over the years, including acrobat and clown Tom Flanagan. Flanagan, also a student of Mr Lu during his time at FFFC, performs his version of the water bottle and umbrella act in his one man Buster Keaton-esque slapstick show “Kaput”. Thus we can see a rhizomic connection between Tom and Derek and FFFC and Mr Lu and Nanjing. This urges us to recall Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on the rhizome's potential to create a succession of alliances, and the distinction between the formula of the rhizome, “and...and...and...”, and tree logic which functions through either/or constructions:

The tree is affiliation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb 'to be,' but the fabric of the rhizome is conjunction, ‘and... and... and...’ This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb 'to be'. Where are you going? Where are coming you from? What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions. Making a clean slate, starting or beginning again from ground zero, seeking a beginning or a foundation – all imply a false conception of voyage and movement... (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.25)

Chinese training should not be seen as some sort of beginning or origin, rather as having become an ongoing presence forming alliances between artists, trainers and acts or apparatuses, bringing things into different assemblages, other lines of flight from classical Chinese circus. Jesse Scott, a founding member of Brisbane based independent ensemble Casus, trained under Mr Lu at FFFC before entering the sector as a professional at the age of 19. During a tour performing with Casus at the Montreal
Complètement Cirque Festival, he spoke with me about how that early training and exposure to traditional Chinese circus methods continues to influence his practice to date, and that of Casus:

We kind of look at traditional circus as well, and what the traditional circus skills are. For example in our work 'Driftwood', we have head-pole, something that I did when I was in FFFC under the training of Mr Lu. We looked to that Chinese element. We have been thinking, ‘okay let's see what traditional circus skills have kind of phased out and perhaps revamp it a little bit and put our own spin on it’. That is a big element in how we create, by looking back into the past a bit. And then to put our own spin on it, we enjoy contemporising those influences. (Jesse Scott, Interview, July 2016)

The Chinese presence in the development of the artform enables artists to be inspired by the techniques, to take them into shows and re-invent them, to use the influence to develop another plateau of becoming.

Certainly the intentions informing Nanjing I and II, from both Government and industry standpoints, were to strengthen the technical levels of physical skill for the sector and to foster a cultural exchange and network between China and Australia. However, to take up again the matter of alliance, of always being in the middle, and how rhizomes generate from that in-between, the extent to which the Nanjing projects would influence the artform’s development and identity was not at all anticipated. With characteristic humility, Mr Lu comments:

We (the Nanjing troupe) certainly don’t take credit for what is happening now; we were just here at the right time and so became part of the growth. When we came here, no one realised that we could make that impact. But just at the right time, we did the right things, for the right group of people. And so then those people are now spread out and that influence can be seen extensively. They are all continuing to practice in companies across the country and so that impact is not what we designed the project for, but it has happened. (Guang Rong Lu, Interview, November 2015)

Australian companies and independent artists have not simply repeated Nanjing training, rather, they have de- and reterritorialised traditional Chinese circus methods, thus producing culturally hybridised acts and nuancing Australian contemporary circus.

**Time, natural body and methods**

Circus provides a space for the potential of the human body to be explored. It requires risk, focus and discipline, repetition, and quite literally blood, sweat and tears. Farrell explains how Chinese trainers told one Nanjing participant, “...that his personal effort
in training could be gauged by the three levels of sweat: ‘sweat from the skin, sweat from the muscles, sweat from the bones’” (2007, p.78). As an aerialist I can testify to the accuracy of some of these old adages: the ripped hands bleeding from the trapeze bar, burns from the trapeze ropes, and sweat that certainly feels as if it comes “from the bones” and is inevitable after hours of repetition and muscle exhaustion. Tears are common from pain and exhaustion, but even more often from frustration when a desired skill seems unattainable or worse, just out of reach. Circus bodies are determined, resilient, disciplined bodies that desire a connection to and attainment of a high degree of artistry of the human body. Foucault’s (1975/1991) work on repetitive action and gestures in the production of “disciplined bodies” can provide insights into the importance of efficiencies of time and gesture involved in achieving maximum control of one’s body in order for it to perform highly skilled circus techniques. While Foucault is, of course, concerned with disciplinary régimes that are deployed so that a minority of more powerful people can control far greater numbers of less powerful people by disciplining them to discipline themselves, to become “docile bodies”, his insights are nevertheless significant in relation to disciplinary régimes developed by performers in order to bring their own bodies into habitual relations with themselves. In explaining the disciplinary role of “the correlation of the body and the gesture” Foucault observes that:

Disciplinary control does not consist simply in teaching or imposing a series of particular gestures; it imposes the best relation between a gesture and the overall position of the body, which is its condition of efficiency and speed. In the correct use of the body, which makes possible a correct use of time, nothing must remain idle or useless: everything must be called upon to form the support of the act required. A well-disciplined body forms the operational context of the slightest gesture. (1975/1991, p.152)

Circus artists must train numerous hours a day to accomplish control of their bodies, to embed what is often referred to as “body memory” or “muscle memory”. Muscle memory is achieved through repetition of a movement/technique to create a pathway for the brain to imprint a memory on the muscles – that is, the body “remembers” how to perform a perfectly controlled press to handstand47 or pike to sit on trapeze48. Both movements require hours of technical repetitive action training. The classical Chinese circus techniques that the Nanjing trainers taught were often drawn from repetitive actions. Farrell comments, “The fundamental principle of Chinese training is repetition.

47 A press to handstand is the action of pulling your feet up into a handstand with no jumping, purely using core stability muscles to move into the handstand shape.
48 A pike through to sit is when a trapeze artist hangs from her hands and pulls her legs up to the bar through her hands and whips them down so that she arrives sitting above the bar.
At every stage of training – strength, flexibility, and object manipulation – the participants were confronted with relentless repetitive action" (2008, p.191). This repetitive action of Chinese circus techniques or gestures gives participants disciplined bodies, forming a technical base that enables those disciplined bodies to react to a learned movement and then, using their artistic values and ideological aims, create a moment of contemporary performance from it. The highly ordered training provides the artists with new ways of exploring what a body can do and express. The movements of classical Chinese techniques became body memory for the Nanjing participants. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “[a] movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its ‘world’..." (1962, pp.160-161).

In interview Mr Lu shared the philosophy he has developed regarding how he approaches training the bodies of Australian circus performers to reach their maximum potential as acrobats, and also described the approach he uses, developed over the many decades of working in the Australian contemporary circus sector. He observed that his goal became not only to train his students to achieve a high level of skill but also to shape them to become focused and dedicated artists. This became central to his philosophy of teaching: not only are you training the body, you are training the artist. He explains:

So when we came here, Australia had circus, Western countries had circus, so we were not introducing a new form. What we introduced was a method – how to pedagogically and gradually gain the skill to the level that you want to use it. You introduce a system of training. (Guang Rong Lu, Interview, November 2015)

Within that system of training, Mr Lu clarified a simple, yet effective framework that can be applied to any student, at any level of skill. As he explained to me, we all have the same amount of time to achieve our skills training, for time does not change, we cannot create more time and also that we are born into a certain body type which will in many ways determines what we are naturally inclined to achieve. Certain body types lend themselves to certain apparatus and movements. For example I am a petite (153cm tall) acrobat which naturally makes it easier for me to be thrown around by acrobatic bases, and often sees me as the person on the very top of the human pyramid (a flyer). This is not to say that I cannot be the base of a human pyramid, perhaps it just means that I may need to spend more time and more focus to achieve the capacity in my body to do so than I need to spend in order to be a flyer. It is a matter of choice for the individual artist as to what apparatus or acrobatic skill he or she wishes to pursue. Mr
Lu then explained that each artist then requires a method enabling him or her to achieve that skill, to become accomplished:

There are three things that will make for successful training. One is of course time, you need time to train the body. Two is your own natural body. And three is methods. Time – you can’t change it, we all have 24 hours in a day. So you need to make your time count and be efficient in how you use it. Body limitation is tangible, you have the body you have been given and you work to train that natural body. All we can really change and control completely are the methods. So we develop methods to influence the body and time to achieve outcomes. And so methods become developed through practice, though research, experimentation with apparatus, modern science. If you don’t have openness to improving your methods you will be stuck and left behind. (Guang Rong Lu, Interview, November 2015)

Coming from a classical Chinese circus background, it was a steep learning curve for Mr Lu when he first arrived in Australia. He and the other Nanjing trainers began to understand the difference in approach to how artists chose the skills they wanted to develop. For example in classical Chinese circus, you were often told by your trainer, based on your body type and also quite often based on your gender, what skills you should be learning. As I mentioned before: small petite female = flyer or aerialist; small male might be directed to be a tumbler or a hoop diver. However, since traditional gender roles were, from the very beginning of Circus Oz, not only ignored by Australian artists but overtly defied, the Nanjing participants were firm in insisting that they need to be able to experiment with various skills. In Sweat from the Bones (2008) Farrell explains the original gendered approach to the training and how the Circus Oz participants were resistant:

Initially the Chinese trainers refused to teach the female students hoop diving because it was traditionally a ‘male skill’ (Interviews). This act would go on to become a longstanding Circus Oz act. The Chinese trainers explained that, in China, females do not train in dive rolls, a requirement for hoop diving, because they are not strong enough (Ibid). The Australian organisers ‘insisted that the girls were going to do everything the boys did’ and the Chinese proved flexible, adapting to the gender equality directive (Ibid). Lu Guang Rong suggests the Chinese and Australian trainers had a ‘different philosophy’ to training. He identified a cultural difference in the way students came to acrobatic training (Lu,G. 2004). (2008, p.160)

Over time, Mr Lu arrived at a similar approach, after working in the Australian contemporary circus sector and witnessing the diversity of gendered bodies achieving

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49 Hoop Diving is a traditional Chinese circus act where acrobats perform acrobatic movements by diving through wooden or steel hoops that are precariously stacked on top of one another.
a multitude of circus skills. He began to develop a teaching philosophy that was flexible and openly catered to the individual student, adapting his training methods to suit the learning process of each student:

There is a fundamental difference in the way that we (Chinese) have been brought up and have been training and the way Australians have been brought up and are training. The system that we grew up in was 'You fit in to a box or you get out'. If you can fit in to the system then you can be made to be very talented and successful, if you can't fit into that box you will lose that opportunity altogether. However here in Australia it is the opposite, you have the fundamental methods of teaching but you need to make a box for each individual. (Guang Rong Lu, Interview, November 2015)

Mr Lu therefore developed his method of training the acrobat to be not only a technician but an artist, encouraging his students to approach their development with a layered practice that always takes into account the artistic integrity of the skill: “We cannot forget one thing, showing the skill is not the final objective of artistic development, you need to see the total value. The more skills you have, the more tools you have, but you then need to apply another layer to get an artistic outcome.” (Guang Rong Lu, Interview, November 2015).

Earlier I discussed how the ongoing rhizomics of Chinese circus techniques have come to constitute a “refrain” that connects Australian contemporary circus companies and independent artists and contributes to the nuances that make those companies and artists distinctive and recognisable in the international sector. I suggested that the willingness to transform Chinese technique so that it met the needs and expectations of Australian performers and companies could be thought about like a “call and response”. I have stressed that in analysing such effects we should be heed Deleuze and Guattari’s many warnings about reliance on “origin” narratives that can too readily occlude, elide, even erase significant elements that contribute to the milieu and thus the rhizomes and lines of flight that have connected to it, taken off from it and looped back to it. Nevertheless, just as the industry has developed a narrative concerning “three waves” in the development of the Australian contemporary circus sector, it frequently constructs Mr Lu and the influence of Chinese techniques as an origin narrative. As with the “three waves”, this origin story has been an important way of acknowledging a central element in the artform’s history, aesthetics and values. Yet we can only benefit from a more subtle analytics for an artform that proliferated so rapidly and is always becoming more richly diverse, and we also need to remember that in many of his remarks, such as “we were just here at the right time and so became
part of the growth”, Mr Lu has himself refused the origin narrative in favour of in-betweenes and connections.

In her various directing and management roles in Australian contemporary circus, as well as with ACAPTA, Gail Kelly has toured internationally and shared conversations with many of the global leaders of contemporary circus. She has therefore experienced responses to the leading Australian companies from international audiences and industry personnel. Kelly shared with me her observations about the development of the signature style of Australian circus, the part Chinese influences played in the artform’s development, and how this compares to the training influences in other leading circus sectors around the world:

We owe our whole contemporary circus style and technique and repertoire to the Chinese, we have been totally influenced by them. All of the companies that were seminal – Rock n Roll Circus, Circus Oz, Legs on the Wall – all of them where trained by the Chinese. There is a regime and a high level of training in this country influenced by the Chinese method and that is why all of those artists who have trained this way are so amazing. When you ask people overseas the point of difference between Montreal and Australia, we’ve been trained by the Chinese so we are highly athletic. So take Gravity and Other Myths, for example: each artist is highly technical and athletic in their movement. And it fits our Australian culture, it makes sense for us to be athletic in our artform. However for Montreal, the head of training at École Nationale de Cirque has said that they never made a connection with the Chinese, so there is no real influence of Chinese acrobatics over there, whereas here it is really strong. In Montreal they have more of a connection to the Russian methods of circus training. I remember when I was in Montreal and the local circus industry saw “Tom Tom Crew” perform and they were blown away by the skill, and I said ‘They are all Flying Fruit Fly Circus’ students. They have been trained by the Chinese since they were eight! (Gail Kelly, Interview, November 2015)

It is worth noticing that while she seems to be attributing an origin story to the influence of Chinese training, in fact Kelly describes that influence in terms of how it suited what was already there, in particular, how it “fits our Australian culture...to be athletic in our artform”. Kelly refers to, “Tom Tom Crew”, created by Strut n Fret Production House in 2006, a highly successful work that toured nationally and internationally for seven consecutive years. A dynamic and highly physical show, its style combined street and hip-hop culture with the artform of circus. The original cast was Tom Flanagan, Benjamin Lewis, Shane Witt, and Daniel Catlow, (all graduates of the FFFC in Mr Lu’s era) along with a live DJ, drummer Ben Walsh and internationally renowned beat-boxer Tom-Thum. The circus acts in the show, teeter-board, aerial straps, tumbling and handstands were recognisable as core skills taught at the FFFC and certainly highlighted the extraordinary level of technical training occurring in Australia.
“Tom Tom Crew” exemplifies how Nanjing I and II, Mr Lu, those he has trained and those they have trained and worked beside, contribute to a refrain that has played through multiple generations of Australian contemporary circus. The refrain also recurs horizontally, across multiple manifestations of the artform connected by the rhizomes that flow into, through, from and back to the milieu of which the refrain forms a familiar element. In these ways, contemporary circus in Australia becomes what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to as a “domain” or an “abode”, recognisable for sharing expressive qualities and alliances. Developing their ideas about refrains and the part they play in territoriality, they comment on other “marking” behaviours in the natural world, stressing that through such signatures “a milieu component becomes both a quality and a property” (1987, p.315). They continue,

It has been remarked how quick this becoming is in many cases, the rapidity with which a territory is constituted at the same time as expressive qualities are selected and produced. The brown stagemaker (Scenopoetes dentirostris) lays down landmarks each morning by dropping leaves it picks from its tree, and then turning them upside down so the paler underside stands out against the dirt: inversion produces a matter of expression. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 315)

The “brown stage-maker” is another name for the Australian tooth-billed catbird (actually Ailurodeus dentirostris), which lives in the mountain rainforests of north-east Queensland. The male bird is in fact very meticulous in his stage making. He cleans, even sweeps, the area clear of other materials that might distract from his display; carefully snips from his home-territory tree large, even-sized leaves with equal lengths of stem; then arranges and rearranges them until he is happy with the display. He sometimes uses white objects, pebbles or old snail shells, to add to the glow produced by the overturned leaves on the dark floor or the deep forest. Once happy with his stage, he sings and dances from nearby perches and also in his “bower stage” to attract mates (Frith ed. 1977, p.558). This bird and the spotted catbird, share stage-making behaviours with members of the larger Australian bower bird group, all of which are stage makers, often in quite spectacular ways. The most familiar is the satin bower bird (Ptilonorhynchus violaceus) that inhabits coastal and hinterland forests (and gardens) from south east Queensland to Victoria. The iridescent black male with bright blue eyes, makes a flattened area flanked on either side by open-ended, inward-arcing “walls” or “curtains” of grass and twigs, into which he brings objects – flowers, bottle tops, pegs – of a particular shade of blue. He arranges them in patterns which are renewed, increased, arranged and rearranged daily. He uses this as a stage in which he dances to attract females, numbers of whom observe from nearby perches, deciding whether the display impresses them enough to enter the space to mate.
It is a nicely appropriate example of praxis in relation to milieu that many Australian birds and animals demonstrate high levels of physical skill, extraordinarily adept and multi-skilled creativity or both, given that these are the signature features of Australian circus, along with the larrikin qualities mentioned earlier\(^\text{50}\). But to return to the main thread – the stage-maker and the satin bower bird, in building, decorating and performing in their signature ways in their signature spaces, are making territorial marks, producing domains for their distinctive needs and performativity.

Deleuze and Guattari stress that, “[t]he territory is not primary in relation to the qualitative mark; it is the mark that makes the territory. Functions in a territory are not primary; they presuppose a territory-producing expressiveness” (1987, p.315). Wondering whether becoming-expressive can “be called Art”, they suggest that the artist might be “the first person to set out a boundary stone, or to make a mark”, and develop the relation, therefore, between art, expression, possession and abodes:

Property is fundamentally artistic because art is fundamentally *poster, placard* \(^\text{51}\)…The expressive is primary in relation to the possessive; expressive qualities or matters of expression, are necessarily appropriative and constitute a having more profound than being. Not in the sense that these qualities belong to a subject, but in the sense that they delineate a territory that will belong to the subject that carries or produces them. These qualities are signatures, but the signature, the proper name, is not the constituted mark of a subject, but the constituting mark of a domain, an abode. The signature is not the indication of a person; it is the chancy formation of a domain. Abodes have proper names, and are inspired. ‘The inspired and their abodes…’; it is with the abode that inspiration arises. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.316)

Contemporary Australian circus, with its particular characteristics, including the refrain of Chinese skills training, has created a signature style, and in doing so, has come to constitute “a domain, an abode” in which the highly skilled, artistically aware, edgy work of Australian performers can comfortably express itself, within Australia and in other countries. Part of the explanation for the ongoing growth and vitality of the artform probably lies in this, and also in how an abode that expresses one’s signature is also an inspirational context for creative expression.

In 2015 Mr Lu was awarded an Order of Australia Medal (OAM) for his ongoing services to the performing arts in Australia, in recognition not only of his work as a

\(^{50}\) It also seems important to mention, for example, the larrikin qualities of Australia’s cockatoos, galahs, possums, dingoes, and our distinctive working dogs, kelpies and blue heelers…

\(^{51}\) We might think about this in relation to the relation between the artistic and political/satiric qualities of Australian contemporary circus – it has a point to make; its expression *matters* and is rarely purely entertainment.
master circus trainer, but also as an artistic director and advocate for Australian circus. The Nanjing Projects and Mr Lu’s subsequent work continue to contribute to the distinctive, expressive, skilful stylistics of generations of disciplined circus bodies that mark contemporary Australian circus.
Chapter Four: Women in Australian Contemporary Circus

*What a woman’s body can do*

Frequently the distinction between classical family circus and contemporary circus is defined by the absence of performing animals. However, the merging of feminist politics with the performance of strong, muscular and powerful female bodies can perhaps be seen as a defining presence, and as such even more significant for the contemporary de- and reterritorialization of the artform. In Chapter One I touched on the increasing prominence of women’s circus in Australia, which coincided with what is often called the “third wave” of Australian feminism in the 1990s. Several companies were formed during this period, notably *Vulcana Women’s Circus* (Brisbane) and *Women’s Circus* (Melbourne). Women in Australian performing arts were, in fact, using the artform of circus to push boundaries of the representation of gendered bodies considerably earlier, with *Circus Oz* and the *Wimmin’s Circus* (Tasmania) performing circus acts with feminism at the forefront of their artistic ideology as early as 1979. Once again we are reminded that tracings that work in terms of starting points, eras and “waves” can be misleading.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, during Nanjing Project I, which began in late 1983, *Circus Oz* remained firm in their insistence that women could and would train and perform all of the skills being taught at the training intensive. The company has had a strong policy in relation to gender equality as part of its ecology since its first performances. It always featured women taking on what were considered “male” skills in classical circus culture, such as basing human pyramids and performing hoop diving. Clearly this is not to suggest that women were not performing high level physical feats in circus prior to the New Circus era. In the earliest years of aerial performance, particularly in flying trapeze, women were achieving higher skilled and far riskier tricks than their male counterparts. In *Circus Bodies: Cultural identity in aerial performance* (2005) Peta Tait demonstrates that female aerial artists were outperforming males by 1880, with aerialist Lena Jordan being the first artist to successfully perform the backward triple somersault to a catcher[^52] (Tait, 2005, p.57) While the movement for women’s suffrage was underway, the late nineteenth century was by no means marked

[^52]: Tait (2005) notes that Lena Jordan’s backward triple somersault was omitted from circus histories for a period of 60 years, with Ernie Clark instead being acknowledged as the first to perform this feat (2005, p.57).
by women experiencing increased rights or freedoms, nor did the dominance of female aerialists in circus come without heavy disappprobation in relation to what female bodies should be capable of and particularly how they should look. Female aerial artists from the late 1800s to early 1900s were continuously scrutinised and criticised for their performance of danger and the muscularity of their bodies. Indeed, later in the history of aerial performance there was a return to traditional gender roles, which saw female circus artists placed into much less risky roles in performance. This was not without problems in that it disturbed other gendered expectations. As Tait explains:

At the same time, male bodies in graceful flight displayed qualities contradicting manliness and muscular females went completely against prevailing social patterns of bodily restraint. In defiance of public criticism, female aerialists trained for all aspects of aerial work up to the 1930’s. By the 1950’s however, glittering female assistants working with star male flyers and heavier bodied male catchers finally succumbed to fashions in cultural identity. (Tait, 2005, p.3)

Thus, although women trapeze artists had continued to demonstrate the capacity for high level skills, they were no longer able to lead the way in skill or levels of danger. Until the late 1970s the strength of the female circus body was often masked with delicate choreography, sparkling high cut leotards and equally glittering smiles. Celia White discussed with me how New Circus began to push traditional gender roles out of the glitter and into more challenging, and subversive, terrains for female performers.

This is a conversation about artform, but it is also a conversation about gender I think. How can a woman’s body do that? There is a strong underlying strand of women’s circus through the entire history of Australian contemporary circus performance. I think it was a really critical part of New Circus. There is often a focus on the absence of animals, but the thing I remember watching was the “equal opportunity aerial act” that Jane Mullet and Stephen Champion did in Circus Oz. That, as a young emerging feminist and lesbian, stood out for me: it was about sexuality and gender for me and my work. I saw that performance and I saw that it was actually about re-defining the role of women in circus. As much as taking the animals out of circus, it was about how to get rid of those leotards and the fact that they (the women) were pretending that they were just the fluff on the side. (Celia White, Interview, September 2015)

The equal opportunity aerial act was performed on a triple trapeze53 and was a comment on a range of state and federal legislation regarding equal opportunity54 that

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53 A triple trapeze is a static (non-swinging) trapeze made up of three trapeze bars woven into one aerial apparatus. Traditionally, this apparatus was often performed by three women with highly choreographed skills.

54 These included the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Act 1977; the South Australian Equal Opportunity Act 1984; the Western Australian Equal Opportunity Act 1984; the Australian Sex
had been or was being passed in Australia. In typical Circus Oz style, it was extremely tongue-in-cheek, while still holding a strong message against gender discrimination, using the metaphor of equal distribution of strength and power within the trapeze performance. Circus Oz, particularly during its development from the mid-1980s to late 1990s, continued to subvert conventional expectations of women in contemporary circus performance, producing acts that pushed boundaries and provoked strong reactions from audiences.

Circus Oz women behaving badly

Aerialists Simone O’Brien and Kareena Hodgson (formerly Oates) performed a double aerial act that was just what Celia White described as definitive of the era, moving as far away from the “fluff” and sparkly leotards as possible. The act began with Simone O’Brien striking body building poses, showing off her biceps centre stage, only to be interrupted by Kareena Hodgson who ran onto the stage, pushed O’Brien over, stood on top of her then ran into the audience, after which O’Brien chased Hodgson around the Circus Oz Big Top “seeking revenge”. Their slapstick brawl continued as they made their way up onto the trapeze bar where they performed their duo act. The brash characterisation continued into the physical execution of the trapeze performance. Their movements were sharp, dynamic, and almost staccato and highlighted the strength and musculature of their aerial bodies in action, rather than being masked with feathery choreography. This performance exemplified rebellion – not only against what had become the expected, sequinned, “feminine” performance values for women aerialists, but also against the expected demeanour of women in general. O’Brien and Hodgson continued to be anything but delicate, poised and polite in performance: the glitter and showgirl smiles were replaced with mutiny and chaos. In her analysis of how central Circus Oz has been to challenging gender expectations, “Circus Oz Larrikinism: Good Gender Sport?” Peta Tait (2004) captures something important about this element in performance when, having described several such performances through to 2001, she writes, “[w]hile this gender role reversal is delivered as physical clowning, it remains provocatively disturbing. Why is it not quite funny?” (p.79)55. She later answers her own question with the recognition that:

Discrimination Act 1984; Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986. Legislation in other states and territories followed from the early 1990s, for example, Discrimination Act 1991 (Australian Capital Territory); Anti Discrimination Act 1991 (QLD). All were framed to guidelines and legal requirements for equal opportunity in employment and in areas such as property and financial services, that did not discriminate on the grounds of sex/gender, race/ethnicity, disability, political beliefs etc.

55 Tait also describes a number of Circus Oz slapstick acts in which cross-dressed men were “victimised and terrorised” by women (2004, p.79), describing how a “recent spate of acts with physical attacks on
The gender fights in Circus Oz arise from female larrikins displaying competitive behaviour. They are not quite funny because female physical competitiveness is not quite acceptable even at the beginning of the twenty-first century because competitiveness is associated with masculinity. These interactions are edging towards a larrikin subversion of female competitiveness when the latter concept is scarcely acceptable in the wider Australian society. (Tait, 2004, p.80)

It is significant in this connection that the last several years have seen increasing media attention given to women's competitive sport, with national television coverage not only of conventional “women's” sports such as netball, but also of established women's competitions and national representative teams in conventionally “male” sports such as cricket, soccer and basketball. Heartening as this coverage has been, changing social attitudes towards women expressing extreme physicality in competitive sport have been considerably more noticeable with the launch in 2017 of the women's national competition in Australian Football (i.e. the national game, Australian Rules), attended by large crowds and widespread media attention. As the 2018 season opens in the AFLW competition, the continuing crowds and media hype, media creation and promotion of several star women players and so on, indicate that great physicality in women’s sport, for the followers of this national competition and Women's Rugby Sevens, has become not only acceptable, but exciting and aspirational for younger women and girls. A proportion of the AFLW women are muscled, tattooed, powerful-looking athletes, while others have apparently a more “feminine” presence until the play starts, when they all demonstrate strength, skills, highly trained bodies, and a willingness to engage in a body contact sport with the same gusto as men.

But decades before women were finally being lauded as trail blazers in previously male-only competitive sports, they were working on equal terms with men in contemporary circus in Australia. Circus Oz has long been renowned for a larrikin style for both genders. However, Tait recognises that the women’s performances acquired a different relation to the social from those of the men. Seeing such performances, I felt the same as an aerialist myself, and, as a younger woman, it impacted on my notions of what was aesthetically, stylistically, politically, performatively possible. The Circus Oz women’s attitudes, in combination with their skill, implied danger and risk beyond the performance of the circus body, suggesting a further menace: the threat of women misbehaving, breaking social boundaries by exceeding anything that was hapless male personae is both acrobatically inventive and socially defiant in that it is demonstratively mean-spirited females winning the fight with force of cunning” (p.80).
considered appropriate for their gendered identity. Tait (2004) also explores the effects of these elements of performance in relation to “Australianness”:

The female circus larrikin is making a bid to take over the territory of petulant iconoclast formerly held by male identities in Australian performance culture. She provides an exciting and vital generic identity in recent circus shows. She may be an accomplished athlete but she is not a good sport who willingly follows the rules of circus or even the gender game. Circus Oz presents the female larrikin as gender outlaw. (Tait, 2004, p.81)

These “gender outlaws” demonstrate the degree of social, cultural and creative risk that women in circus and the women's circus movement brought to the developing artform. The presence of women in intimidating roles combined with their powerful, skilled circus bodies represents a serious threat to patriarchy on multiple levels. Assumptions about male dominance are disturbed by female contemporary circus artists, through the powerful ways in which they inhabit their own bodies, their muscularity and their creative choices regarding how that muscularity can be performed and what it might represent. Combining social and artistic risk-taking in their work, leading Australian circus artists such as Anni Davey, Deb Batton, Kim Kaos, Nikki Wilks, Sue Broadway and (in)famous Circus Oz strong-woman Mel Fyfe are, as Grosz (1995) explores in Space, Time and Perversion, effectively making their own bodies sources of novel rules and laws, and in turn inscribing those onto the society in which they perform.

If bodies are traversed and infiltrated by knowledges, meanings, and power, they can also, under certain circumstances, become sites of struggle and resistance, actively inscribing themselves on social practices. The activity of desiring, inscribing bodies that, though marked by law, make their own inscriptions on the bodies of others, themselves, and the law in turn, must be counterposed against the passivity of the inscribed body. (Grosz, 1995, p.36)

Grosz continues, “[i]f women are to be granted a position congruous with but independent of men, the female body must be capable of autonomous representation” (1995, p.36). Female circus bodies in Australian contemporary circus performance present themselves to be seen being as they are, congruous with but not in comparison to male circus bodies. They invite their presence to be understood as being “such that it always matters” (Agamben, 1993). Agamben's notion of “whatever being”, discussed above (see Introduction) is particularly useful in considering how the bodies of female circus artists desire to be understood as independent of their assigned gender role as assumed by the dominant values of their culture, and without comparison to their male counterparts as the assumed standard of what a powerful body should be. That is,
each positions herself as a singularity that does what she does in the collective, collaborative context of circus – a singularity that contributes to the making of multiplicities.

**Women’s bodies and the politics of resistance**

Jo Lancaster, a founding member of the independent company *Acrobat* has consistently created work that confronts and disturbs mainstream ideologies regarding the roles of women and of female bodies in contemporary performance. In *Acrobat*’s work “Smaller, Poorer, Cheaper”, the traditional glittering leotard is challenged by Lancaster who performs predominantly topless, wearing only white, typically male underwear and black boots. In one of her solo moments within the show, parodying the stereotype of the newly married housewife, she subverts the expected sexualisation of topless female bodies. As Lancaster stands centre stage, another performer throws a veil over her face, tosses a handful of rice at her, then hands her a vacuum cleaner. Lancaster vacuums up the rice, removes the veil using the vacuum cleaner, then sits down on a chair, nurses the vacuum as though it is an infant, and attaches the vacuum hose to her bare breast. In this performance moment Jo Lancaster resists a patriarchal society’s view of "her place". As Ivan Kralj (2011) remarks, a “Conservative outlook of the world regards the circus woman as the enemy of a concept which defines a woman’s position as ‘her place’, pointing out that her only juggling potential lies within balancing house-keeping and taking care of the children, cooking, cleaning and the need of being a fine wife” (2011, p.42). Lancaster’s artistic choices in this performance expose an uncomfortable truth around the ordering of women’s bodies; she is openly questioning "her place" and the existence of traditional gender roles. This creative risk provides a subverted version of the performance of gendered bodies, and at the same time it emphasises the need to question the social expectations placed upon women on a daily basis. This kind of performance as resistance brings to mind for me Judith Butler’s question, “[a]nd what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire?” (1990, p.139). I want to point to Lancaster, and other women in circus, and answer with, “this kind”.

In the same show, soon after her vacuum cleaner moment, Lancaster performs an exquisitely skilled solo swinging trapeze act, costumed once again in only white male underpants. Her body is revealed in such a way that the rise and fall of her ribs is evident with the execution of each complex aerial acrobatic sequence, as is the exertion of her abdominal muscles and the flexing of her biceps as she grips the ropes
of her trapeze. She is both vulnerable and powerful all at once, human and more than her physical body and the social assumptions that are tied to her gender. Her aerial apparatus becomes an extension of her body, a means of expression that carries cultural and social meaning within the movements of her trapeze performance. As Butler observes, "[t]he question is not: what meaning does that inscription carry within it, but what cultural apparatus arranges this meaning between instrument and body, what interventions into this ritualistic repetition are possible?" (1990, p.146). Lancaster utilises a familiar household item and the tropes of marriage (the bridal veil and rice throwing) alongside her circus apparatus to interrogate conventional perceptions of the roles of women that persist in contemporary society.

Figure 6: Jo Lancaster

Show: Acrobat, "It's not for everyone". Image provided by and reproduced with the permission of Hamish McCormick, Carnival Cinema
Brisbane based artist, Chelsea McGuffin, has also taken creative, social and physical risks in her work, not least in her choice to continue performing throughout the majority of her first two pregnancies. She predominantly freelanced during her first pregnancy, performing solo gigs right into her final trimester. With her second pregnancy McGuffin was a principal performer with Circa. She explained to me that she had an open discussion with artistic director, Yaron Lifschitz, about how she would work while pregnant.

Then when I was pregnant with Arlo I had a job with Circa. Yaron and I discussed it and he said, ‘yeah you can work up until you don’t want to work anymore’. It just happened that the season that we were going to do fitted in well time-wise. So it was sort of perfect timing really. It was a really good show season, and it was also around the time when there was a lot of talk in the media about professional women in sports and about women working when they were pregnant. In Australia at the time they had stopped a female basketball player from playing because she was pregnant. So because there was a lot of media around that, I ended up doing a lot of interviews, in the mainstream media and also in pregnancy magazines about my work. (Chelsea McGuffin, Interview, October 2014)

I saw McGuffin perform during this period. The work was made all the more significant by the implications of a pregnant body, that from a traditional perspective should be cotton-wooled and overly protected, performing skills that are highly physical and that
are also often considered exceedingly risky for a non-pregnant body. Two acts particularly stood out for me both for their aesthetic and the signification they held. The image of McGuffin walking across a tight wire in ballet shoes, balancing on pointe, her petite frame shadowed across the back wall of the theatre, her round belly adding to the poetic aesthetic of the act, is still firm in my mind some ten years on. This performance, in which McGuffin delicately balanced her heavily pregnant frame with superb control, demonstrated for me the power and determination of the female circus body. So, too, did her performance of a double trapeze act with fellow cast member Andrew Bright. She reflected on this act in our interview:

Ange [Andrew Bright] who was my double trapeze partner at the time, he is my closest best friend. And he is amazing in skill, very technical. I trusted him completely. I mean he would sweat profusely when he was catching me, but it was great. And I just knew it was fine, I mean you are so in tune with your body when you are pregnant anyway. And I knew that in that period of time I wasn’t going to learn anything new [i.e. tricks]. I would just do the things that I could already do, and if anything felt uncomfortable or not right I wouldn’t do it. But it rarely did, I felt great! (Chelsea McGuffin, Interview, October 2014)

McGuffin also said that responses to her performances during pregnancy were not always positive, with some reviewers stating that it was an unnecessary risk for both McGuffin and the company to take on. Regardless, McGuffin was, as she stated completely at ease with her choices. As discussed earlier, negative reactions to how women perform their bodies in circus are by no means a new occurrence, nor is it exclusive to circus that external powers are inclined to insist on imposing control over women's bodies. It is an ongoing struggle for the female circus artist to be such as she is, without questioning of her choices by those outside circus.

Circus, however, can provide a space for such artists to provoke and confront conservative ideas of “her place” and in turn offer audiences the same opportunity to question the limitations placed on women. Laurence Senelick (1992) discusses how performers questioning representations of gender can carry a significance that is more loaded and provocative than the performance of gender by individuals in their daily lives. “The performance of gender” he writes, “is doubly fraught with implication when it moves from the everyday sphere onto the stage, where presentation invariably entails representation” (1992, p.1). While the effect of presentation becoming representation will occur anyway, circus artists inevitably communicate their political and social perceptions of gender in a heightened way precisely because those perceptions are being enacted in the circus, which in its classic/traditional form was
not expected to be political. As I explored in Chapter Two, the spatiality of any given circus performance contributes significantly to how that performance is perceived by its audiences. Lighting, staging and artistic direction all contribute to this. As Senelick argues, “[c]onsequently, gender roles performed by performers never merely replicate those in everyday life; they are more sharply defined and more emphatically presented, the inherent iconicity offering both an ideal and a critique” (1992, p.xi).

Circus space as women’s space

Founded in the early 1990s, Club Swing, a collective of female circus artists who identified strongly as feminists, according to director Gail Kelly arose out of a desire to create work autonomously. The women wanted to have the freedom to create whatever content they were interested in without the boundaries that could arise due to the performance values and ideological positions of existing major companies. Kelly said, “We thought, let’s make a company and make our own show so we can do exactly what we want and not be told ‘you can’t do that there and you can’t say that there’. And it could be whatever we wanted it to be” (Gail Kelly, Interview, November 2015). The collective featured Anni Davey, Simone O’Brien, Katherine Niesche, Celia White and Kareena (Oates) Hodgson with Gail Kelly as artistic director. Club Swing took their work “Appetite” on a national tour. It was an aerial theatre show that experimented with concepts of sexuality and desire combined with the tactile messiness of food on bodies, and the tour was successful. This led to them touring the show to the 1995 Edinburgh Fringe Festival where the work came under scrutiny from a local politician, as Celia White explains:

There was some controversy around the show in Edinburgh due to a councillor, a local politician. Each year there is usually something that she picks on in the festival program that she deems morally inappropriate. And we had a poster that was based on an image in the show and it was Anni Davey naked and the rest of us were around her and she was wearing a hat, hanging from a trapeze. It was a pretty bog standard cultural reference. Anyway she picked on us, which was actually a boon for us in the end. We had to edit all of our posters; they had to have a slash put across Anni’s pubes! They couldn’t be seen. We had lots and lots of media coverage that was about four women doing a show about sexuality. (Celia White, Interview, September 2015)

The controversy provided by the local politician’s need to censor the performers’ bodies of course brought the show more attention, marketing and exposure than the company could have anticipated, and as a result their season was incredibly successful. Furthermore, their projected demographic of regular arts festival goers and
feminist theatre enthusiasts was extended to include large groups of men on bucks’ nights, something that was not at all anticipated.

... as a result we had bucks’ party after bucks’ party attending the show, which was really pretty interesting. The media just went a bit bonkers. It was very much around this idea of an ‘only women’ performance company. We were at the Palladium venue and the rest of the shows programmed at that venue were all men. No one commented on that. And the assumption was that as the show was framed around sexuality, then it must be about lesbianism. Because there are not men there and you can't possibly be talking about your own sexuality...so it must be about doing it with women. A bunch of us were dykes, but that was not what the show was about, it was about sexuality, about desire. And you can put your desire anywhere you like, and I think anyone can relate to that. (Celia White, Interview, September 2015)

Club Swing went on to make other successful works, including “Razor Baby” (1998), an exploration of superhero characters in the context of the popular CD-ROM video game culture of the 1990s. “Razor Baby” emulated the virtual worlds of the CD-ROM era and combined its female heroes with the vigorous chaos of aerial apparatus that seemingly fell apart mid-performance. Around the same period many of the artists from Club Swing went on to work together in another all-female circus inspired collective called The Party Line, which Celia White describes as:

A physical theatre company that wanted to explore the feminist shit! We tackled the French feminists. Anni and Simone and Gail were in the Party Line. There were lots of connections to other companies from who was working in the Party Line at that time; there were connections to street theatre and various different types of physical performance in the 90's. There was a real blur there – we were always looking at different genres not just circus. (Celia White, Interview, September 2015)

White is currently artistic director of Vulcana Women’s Circus, and was drawn to the role as the company aligned with her artistic and political ideologies, stating that, “[t]here was the extraordinary combination in Vulcana of feminist, circus and community so it seemed like a perfect fit for me at the time the role of artistic director became available” (Celia White, Interview, September 2015).

Vulcana was founded in 1995 in Brisbane by Antonella Casella who had been working with a group of local female circus artists running circus classes at the Princess Theatre. Casella had returned to Brisbane after completing a contract with Circus Oz.

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56 The Australian term for a men only pre-wedding outing, known elsewhere as a bachelor party (US) or a stag night (UK).
in Melbourne. She had recently started a university degree and at the same time she began teaching circus classes specifically for women:

So I went back to Brisbane and started my degree in politics and critical theory and while I was doing that Karina Oats and Yos Worth were running circus classes for women at the Princess Theatre. Yos went away and so I started teaching those classes with Karina. And I said to her, why don't we put on a women's circus show? Rock n Roll Circus were supportive who were also at the Princess Theatre at the time. The name Vulcana came about when I was at Rudi Mineur's house one day and he showed me a picture of Vulcana in an old book. It is that classic picture of her flexing her bicep and underneath it, it said 'Vulcana the muscular beauty' and I thought, 'That's it! That's it! Vulcana'. So we called ourselves Vulcana Women's Circus and our first show was called 'A girl's own adventure' and I got some funding for it and hired an administrator and we put it on. (Antonella Casella, Interview, June 2016)

Vulcana, born Miriam Kate Williams in 1875, began her career in gymnastics and calisthenics, and swiftly went on to become a renowned circus strong woman. She would often perform alongside William Hedley Roberts, whose stage name was Atlas. Under the guise of “Atlas and Vulcana” they travelled extensively, performing their feats of strength. It is noted that Vulcana often out-performed Atlas in strength and control (Ward 2016) much to his dismay. Vulcana was also known for speaking openly about her political views and against the restrictive clothing for women of the time, namely corsets and high heeled boots. She expressed her preference for wearing clothing that allowed her to exercise her body and maintain physical comfort. In “Sawdust Sisterhood: How circus empowered women” Steve Ward (2016) discusses Vulcana's involvement in the political causes of her era:

Kate was outspoken and unafraid of becoming actively involved in many causes during her life. On her return to Britain, she became a member of the organisation of Women Variety Artists, and in 1906 she helped campaign against the introduction of the Dangerous Performances Bill. If it had been passed, the Bill would have abolished thousands of acrobatic acts; it would have been under the jurisdiction of the police and magistrates to decide what was dangerous and what was not. (Ward, 2016, p.135)

*Vulcana Women's Circus*’s first show was well received and the participants on the project expressed their interest in the possibility of an ongoing circus program for women. As a result, Casella quit university and focused on developing *Vulcana* as an ongoing company, securing funding to run regular classes for local women. Casella notes that although she left university to pursue Vulcana, her time while studying at university influenced the company's philosophy and in turn the work that they created:

“I was reading about feminism in critical theory at Uni, so when I began running
Vulcana as a company I was very much aware of the idea of a contemporary reclaiming of the representation of women, it was very much at the core of what we were doing” (Antonella Casella, Interview, June 2016). Vulcana Women’s Circus went on to secure a permanent residency in the Brisbane Powerhouse’s Stores Studio venue (see Chapter Two) and regularly creates work embodying the feminist theories that inspired its foundation, some of which I explore later in this chapter.

Four years prior to the formation of Vulcana, in 1991 the Women’s Circus was founded by Donna Jackson in Melbourne. The company began as a small project of the Footscray Community Arts Centre (FCAC) a multicultural community arts organisation. Donna Jackson had a personal investment in supporting women recovering from sexual abuse at the time, after witnessing a number of her friends going through the process. She wanted to provide a creative space that enabled them to feel safe, empowered and supported in their recovery. In her chapter in the book documenting the first six years of the organisation, Women’s Circus: leaping off the edge (1997) Jackson explains how the Women’s Circus began and what their initial agenda was:

The first women to join the circus were survivors of sexual abuse. Membership was then offered to women generally, with an overwhelming response from women of many different backgrounds. The circus gave us a chance to explore the strength, endurance and skill our bodies can attain. The workshops are a place where we can reaffirm control over our bodies, and performances communicate our vision and ideas to a broad cross-section of society. (Beissbarth & Turner eds, 1997, p.5)

Jackson suggests that the success of the company was due to its diversity of representations of women coming together with a shared philosophy, in a space where embracing otherness was central to the company’s mission. That philosophy soon extended to the Women’s Circus’s audiences, with the company regularly performing both corporate and community gigs in Melbourne. Jackson explains that, “[a]s the Women’s Circus developed, it began to challenge audience expectations by combining theatre and circus skills to develop an original style that was absurdist and surreal” (Beissbarth & Turner eds, 1997, p.4).

Over twenty-five years on from their initial pilot program with FCAC, the Women’s Circus has facilitated workshops for thousands of women, both in their ongoing circus program in West Melbourne, and also with their consistent work with the local community. Alongside their community engagement programs they have produced performances at the Melbourne Festival, Adelaide Fringe Festival and Pride March (Melbourne). The organisation has received numerous awards for their ongoing
commitment to social circus practice including a 2005 Melbourne Award for Community Development and a 2010 Innovation Award from the Melbourne Festival. Further, the company has provided a platform for offshoot organisations such as the Performing Older Women's Circus (POW) to emerge, which was formed in 1995 out of the Women's Circus community. POW is a collective that challenges ageist attitudes towards women. Beyond their local achievements, the Women's Circus toured Beijing in 1995 as part of the United Nations Conference on Women (www.womenscircus.org.au) and more recently (2017-2018) the company has begun a creative exchange project with Circus Kathmandu, a Nepalese social circus company who work with youth at risk.

The existence of feminist-led circus companies such as Women's Circus and Vulcana inspired a number of all female organisations to emerge around Australia. With the company motto of "Ordinary Women doing extraordinary things", Circus WOW (Women of Wollongong) was created by Penny Lowther in 2001. It was a rich time for circus for the city of Wollongong with Circus Monoxide taking up residency in the city in 2000 through an invitation from the local city council. Circus WOW has seen its participants go on to become professional artists in the contemporary circus industry and maintains its original vision: “Circus WOW is a creative community that supports women to do the extraordinary” (www.circuswow.org.au).

In a similar vein to the work of POW, in 2013 Sue Broadway and Deb Batton, both icons of Australian contemporary circus, formed Batton and Broadway, a duo with the objective of challenging perceptions of people over the age of fifty in contemporary circus performance. In their own words, “Celebrating the circus of Cinquegenarians [sic], or the over 50s if you like, Batton and Broadway presents the works of circus artists with a history” (Facebook)\(^57\). Batton and Broadway’s first project was a cabaret-style variety show called “The Classics” (2014) which featured performances from artists over the age of fifty and was presented in the Circus Oz Melba Spiegel Tent. In 2017 they presented their new show “One and the Other”, a slapstick, theatre and circus hybrid in which they delve into the difficulties, apparent messiness and chaos of aging in contemporary society. Both Batton and Broadway still work extensively in the sector as guest directors and mentors for the next generation of female artists.

\(^{57}\) People aged 50-59 are correctly referred to as quinquagenerarians, however, even if it is an accidental misuse, somehow the French for “5” (cinque) echoes the word and the world of circus more than the Latin for “50” (quinqua).
In 2016 Circus Oz launched its “Strong Women” program, which in its inaugural format provided a group of nine female circus artists with the opportunity to take on advanced circus training and creative development opportunities. The program brought the women together to work with acclaimed director (and long-time burlesque artist) Maude Davey and also connected them with other leading female artists to provide mentorship. Working with Davey as guest director, the nine artists were taken through act creation and performance techniques with the aim of encouraging creative outcomes that challenged conventions, preconceptions and normative ideas about what women are capable of doing. “Strong Women” is now an annual program hosted at the Circus Oz headquarters in Richmond. Circus Oz describes their vision for the program as follows:

This program aims to develop female circus artists that [sic] are able to send an empowering message to the broader community that sexism is not ok, that women are all shapes and sizes, that girls don’t have to behave or look a certain way, and importantly that women are strong and capable. Circus Oz celebrate what women are capable of – incredible strength and stamina, extraordinary grace, rebellious spirit and ability to laugh in the face of danger. While a giant step forward was made for gender equity in the 70’s, Circus Oz believes it is still a long journey towards true equality. This is why Circus Oz champions the potential and actual achievements of women by promoting role models and challenging perceptions. Our program provides a dedicated path for the development and celebration of women within the contemporary circus industry, nurturing emerging talent through dedicated training, masterclasses, mentoring and recruitment. (Website; emphasis in original)

The women’s circus movement survives, although many of the organisations have suffered in the wake of major arts funding cuts under successive conservative governments. Particular damage was when the Abbott Government’s Arts Minister (and Attorney General) George Brandis cut A$105 million from the Australia Council for the Arts in the 2015-16 Federal Budget. The impact of this was particularly harsh in Queensland where not long prior to the federal cuts the former state Premier, Campbell Newman, made major cuts to funding for arts and community organisations, which saw Vulcana Women’s Circus lose its entire recurrent operational funding. However, Vulcana ran a successful crowd-funding campaign which raised $50,000 to

58 This funding was reallocated to a program called “The National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA). The funding model for the NPEA is exempt from the mechanisms that had at least since the 1970s maintained the independence of the Australia Council from government interference. It was immediately obvious to many in the arts that the change in previously arms length funding principles would weaken smaller companies and community/grassroots arts organisations that had conventionally been more critical of government, while giving government more direct power to determine which companies, organisations and artists are recognised as ‘excellent’ for funding purposes.
enable it to continue to operate while seeking out a new business model to ensure its sustainability. As for other companies, as I noted earlier, Australian contemporary circus has developed a strong national and international reputation, and most companies have managed to continue their operations due to touring more, thus increasing their sustainability and reducing their reliance on government funding. It is, though, a worrying trend that various conservative governments at both states and federal levels have tended to target the arts for savage funding cuts. In the performing arts, these have hit particularly hard in youth and social theatre programs, community arts organisations, social circus etc: that is, the segments of the arts industry that try to help the disadvantaged, and therefore have been and remain most critical of government policies that disadvantage women, the poor, and those who are different, whether in terms of their ethnicity, their abilities or their sexual preferences.

**Can we talk about the girl in the red dress?**

The most influential period for women in Australian contemporary circus, during the 1990s and early 2000s, produced a legacy that still resonates in the sector. Nevertheless, it remains the case that there is a considerable disparity between the number of women on stage in the major touring circus companies compared to the number of men. Furthermore, in many cases the artistic/aesthetic and performative representations of female artists within some companies can be seen as problematic and somewhat tokenistic. For example, *Company2*’s work “Scotch and Soda” features nine men alongside Chelsea McGuffin, while *Gravity and Other Myths*’ latest work “Backbone” sees nine men performing with three female acrobats. *Gravity and Other Myths* expanded their existing cast of seven artists to eleven for this new work, adding only one new female artist and three males. *Casus* work with a smaller cast. However their significant work, “Knee Deep”, has three male artists and one female. All three companies have toured these particular shows extensively across the international arts festival circuit.

It is important to note that this gap in gender representation in contemporary circus performance is not unique to the Australian sector. There is currently an international trend in contemporary circus towards staging six or more burly men alongside one petite woman. She is often costumed in a red or sometimes white dress and is flipped and thrown across the stage by her sturdy male acrobatic bases. Although an educated audience will know that the female artist is highly skilled with equal acrobatic capacity to her male counterparts, she is frequently portrayed as something akin to an attractive prop. At a time when a mid-twentieth century retro aesthetic is obvious in fashion and
home decorating, as well as in musical theatre and film revivals, this trend in circus has very sad redolences of “back to the Fifties”. Clearly it is not simply an aesthetic choice, and it has very real implications for the futures of women artists in contemporary circus. Audiences rarely encounter “the girl in the red dress” performing a solo in the show. She is, for the most part, flanked by multiple, often shirtless, men and relies upon them to catch her, throw her, and spin her. In further examples, Quebecois company Cirque Eloize toured their show "Cirkopolis" to Australia in 2017. The show features eight men and four women, one of whom is costumed in a floaty red dress. Also from Montreal, Les Sept Doigts de la Main's (7 Fingers) highly successful work "Traces" has seven male artists and one female.

At the national and international circus research conferences and industry gatherings I have attended since 2014, there have been numbers of in-depth discussions around the tokenism of this trend towards “the girl in the red dress”. The topic repeatedly surfaces as a contentious issue in both artistic and academic strands of the sector. It is, quite simply, not good enough that gender representation in what can be seen as some of the leading companies in contemporary circus over the last decade has shifted such that we routinely see women artists taking on the role of supporting artists, rather than lead acts. There is no question that the women artists in all of the aforementioned companies are capable of stand-alone performance at an incredibly high skill level, both artistically and technically. Consequently, we must ask, why are women currently under-represented in too many major companies and what are the potential repercussions of this global trend?

I discussed this with former artistic director of Circus Oz, Mike Finch, asking him how we ended up where we are now, with this as a global issue for the artform. He observed,

I think we got there by letting our guard down and by letting market forces kick in. It requires vigilance. In terms of gender and a few [other] areas, I believe in quotas. They get a bad name in the business world, in terms of it perhaps being seen as patronising. But the end result I think is positive. It takes time and requires vigilance. It slips away so quickly when a company puts 11 men on stage and 2 small women in red dresses. (Mike Finch, Interview, February 2017)

As mentioned above, Circus Oz has had a strong company ethos and policy for equality and diversity in their shows since the company's inception. This is why, some forty years on, the company remains consistent in its equal casting of female artists and in its artistic choices around the representation of women on stage. As Mike Finch explains:
There was already a policy in place for equal quotas of gender in terms of artistic casting at Circus Oz when I arrived. And it just so happened that it also rang true for me as a director. A gender balance was what I inherited there and it is one of the things that I am proud of maintaining during the 17 years I was Artistic Director. I was interested in the notion of wanting to actively show women in positions of strength that they were normally denied. So I would prioritise a mixture of bodies; types that break the mould of what people expect on stage, not just petite female flyers, but strong, solid female bases alongside them. Because when you play to a mainstream audience in Australia, say for instance a small country town audience, that may only be exposed to mainstream media and mainstream stereotypes, it is totally mind blowing for them to see women performing in this way and to see the diversity of female bodies on stage. We used to get a lot of mothers who would come up after the show with their daughter and they would come up to Mel Fyfe [Circus Oz strong woman] and they would just be in awe of her and exclaim that watching her perform has inspired their child to do more physical activity and to think outside the box.

(Mike Finch, Interview, February 2017)

As alluded to briefly above, at the start of own my circus career, at the age of 19, one of the most influential moments for me as a young artist was seeing the women of Circus Oz break down the barriers of the dainty female aerialist. I recall watching iconic artists such as Anni Davey and Antonella Casella, with their amazing strong, dynamic bodies. As a petite female, I identified with Casella who is around the same height as me (153cm) – watching a smaller woman doing amazing things with strength and risk gave me permission to explore the same terrains myself. Seeing Circus Oz was a turning point. It was both the ideology of women performing their bodies in ways that were unexpected, and the brashness of the company: there were no delicate girls/women on stage; they were brash, raw and rebellious. Consistently the company ideology that Circus Oz supports in relation to gender equality provides a platform for women to be just as they are. The comparative element of female artists as “other” or “less than” their male colleagues is greatly diminished when they are represented as equal to those colleagues.

However, with a great majority of the leading companies producing work that is far from balanced in terms of diversity of gender on stage, it is important to reflect on how this impacts on the sector overall, and moreover how “the girl in the red dress” reduces the opportunities for women in contemporary circus. Grosz, like many other feminist scholars, argues strongly that:

If women are represented as the bodily counterparts to men’s conceptual supremacy, women’s bodies, pleasures, and desires are reduced to versions or variants of men’s bodies and desires. Women are thus conceptualized as castrated, lacking, and incomplete, as if these were
inherently qualities (or absences) of their (natural) bodies rather than a function of men's self-representations. (1995, p.38)

During our conversation, Chelsea McGuffin considered the social and political repercussions of her work as the sole female artist in Company 2's "Scotch and Soda", and I asked whether her work could be read as political:

Well actually everything that we do is political. "Scotch and Soda", that's got nine men and only one woman in it. And some people were frustrated by that, they would say to me, 'you can't do that'. They see it as totally imbalanced, but on the other hand I see it differently. As a company, we did that because that's the situation we are in, I work with three blokes and the band happened to be all male, so that is just how it was. But if you look at it from the other way it's actually a great political statement. It's actually a reflection of our world. And it's actually really good to see a really strong woman doing some things amongst men. I do not necessarily identify with the feminism of the early Circus Oz days, that was their voice. We are different now, we look different now. I don't think that we need to present ourselves in exactly the same form of the 1970s feminism era to say, 'I am a feminist'. As artists, we can show that in who we are, we don't always have to shout it. For me, art is always political: that's why we do it. (Chelsea McGuffin, Interview, October 2014)

McGuffin's position that the work is a reflection of the current society rings true to some extent, given the ongoing gendered gap in wages and income on a global scale. However, presenting that gender imbalance on stage without satire or critique of gender inequity being part of the show, surely has repercussions for the artform in that it can just as readily be seen to reinforce an already uphill battle for women in contemporary performance. As I mentioned earlier, in the context of a performance issues such as gendered bodies present as more intense and magnified, and are interpreted as significant. Performance thus holds the potential to either reinforce or break down existing embedded narratives of the gendered body in society. In her influential 1988 article, "Performative acts and gender constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory" Butler wrote, "[a]s an intentionally organized materiality, the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention. In other words, the body is a historical situation, as Beauvoir has claimed, and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation" (1988, p.521). The insight was and remains highly significant for women considering how their bodies are experienced, by themselves and both others. Later Butler observes, "[t]he formulation of the body as a mode of dramatizing or enacting possibilities offers a way to understand how a cultural convention is embodied and enacted" (1988, p.525), which amounts to a simple and powerful statement of why it really does continue to matter how we perform gender in contemporary circus.
There are several analyses regarding how under-representation of women in some of the major touring companies has become a global trend. Some of these are being explored in the work of Quebecois scholar, Alisan Funk. In 2016, at the Encounters with Circus and its Others conference at Concordia University, she delivered a paper about the disproportionately low number of women applying for and graduating from the major tertiary circus training institutions. With many circus companies casting from such institutions, this is potentially a contributing factor to the discrepancy of female artists being cast in major roles. On the other hand, I’d suggest that the opposite could as readily be the case – if young women do not see women represented in touring shows, they are less likely to enrol in a program that trains them for a sector that appears not to offer them a secure future as a performer.

Mike Finch suggested the potential cultural factors that could be responsible might stem not only from the training institutions but also the gendered nature of childhood, with young boys being encouraged to take physical risks more than young girls, which is perhaps why we see men performing more frequently on a high-risk apparatus such as the teeter-board59:

> The other thing that is contributing to the discrepancy of women on stage in contemporary circus is something [that] goes back to the roots of gendered childhoods where the boys are encouraged to get their 10 thousand hours of risk taking out and to throw their bodies around, so that by the time they graduate from the circus schools of course they are good at teeterboard etc. It becomes a perpetuating cycle with less encouragement of the female bodies to excel etc. I would love to see all of that gender issue stuff to be discussed at all levels in the circus sector from the training institutions to the companies. Is there a culture of mostly male trainers etc? (Mike Finch, Interview, February 2017)

There is an emergent spike in small independent all female companies across the Australian sector, anecdotally as a reaction to “the girl in the red dress” trend. It is heartening to see such resistance reappearing. Predominantly the new feminist-led companies are growing out of the existing women’s circus culture, with established industry leaders such as Celia White providing artistic direction and mentoring to the next generation of feminist circus artists. In 2017 two new companies were formed from Vulcana Women’s Circus: GUSH and Common Thread. GUSH describes itself as “...a feminist circus ensemble that uses the repertoire of circus and the theatricality of contemporary performance to explore the way the performing feminine body is read

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59 A teeter-board is a ground based apparatus made out of wood which acts as a see-saw/catapult. It is a group based apparatus that sees for acrobats launched into flight, performing multiple flips, aiming to land safely back on the teeter-board. It is known for having a high rate of injury.
and misread” (Website). Common Thread’s work entitled “Resting B*tch Face” is presented as a statement on the modern world’s obsession with Instagram and YouTube, the implications of social media celebrities and what could be referred to as “The Kardashian Effect”. These new companies are a promising response to the gender gap currently being experienced in the sector. Obviously more needs to be done to ensure that the tendency for leading women to dissolve into the shadows is not repeated. After all, it was seen in classic/traditional circus, so that by the 1950s women were reduced to pretty sequinned additions to the performances of men.

But the sequins were deterritorialised and the circus was reterritorialised as part of the radically resistant, larrkin, edgy and risky work of the women and men who worked so hard and so creatively during the development of New Circus and contemporary circus in Australia. In my analysis, what we are seeing with a small but significant renaissance of women’s circus in Australia at present is a line of flight that takes off from the recognition that something has been lost then loops back to form rhizomes with the people and practices who drove Circus Oz and women’s circuses. These rhizomies can impel the re-emergence of work that is gender-sensitive and alert to differently sexed bodies, and at the same time pick up on newer concerns for all of us in terms of how bodies are valued and what bodies can do.

I agree with Mike Finch’s astute recognition that we must be vigilant. In doing so, we will need to maintain the ties with existing women’s circus, and nurture emerging companies. This requires alertness to how gender and sexuality inform the artform at all levels, from circus schools to major companies. In the contemporary period, our ideological project in relation to genders and sexualities must address the backwards trend that has occurred, by deterritorialising “the girl in the red dress”, reterritorialising performances with more women, and promoting equal representation. However, at the same time we must deal with significant changes in social and cultural attitudes and policies in relation to queer and non-heteronormative sexualities, trans-gendered and non-gendered bodies. If any artform can give a home to emergent and transformative sexualities and ideologies, it is surely contemporary circus. It might almost be seen as a social duty for contemporary circus companies not only to reverse current retrograde trends but also to take up the challenge of multi-representational performances.
Chapter Five: A rhythm of bodies

Creativity, risk and embodiment:

This chapter is concerned with how risk and trust and authenticity play out in various sub-genres of contemporary circus performance, and how circus artists use their bodies to explore not only the extremities of “what a body can do” but also of what a body can say.

I have discussed how the Australian milieu has been characterised by the extent to which contemporary circus performers put their bodies, their creativity and often their political agendas on the line. I have further stressed how this milieu has operated as the middle, the in-between, from which the rhizomics of the sector have been impelled and to which they often return. Beyond admiration for the skill and technicalities that are the product of training and rehearsal, the added layer that circus bodies offer to audiences is the way in which they appear to defy and defeat gravity. The possibilities of the human body are revealed. For successful contemporary circus productions, creative and ideological risk is as important as the physical risk encountered in the execution of tricks. Nevertheless, it is the body of the circus performer that literally puts itself at risk in every training session, every rehearsal, every performance. Circus performers, from jugglers and sword swallowers to acrobats and aerialists, take the perception “that cannot be done” and, to use a circus metaphor, turn it upside down. They create their own bodily “rules”, their own ways of being and becoming.

I have also discussed how contemporary circus is characterised by the presence of what we might consider resistant subjects – people who are frequently regarded by normative society as eccentric, idiosyncratic, even “freaks”. Yet, these same people are at the same time collaborative nomads in a supportive community (see Chapter One). Disregard for stereotypes or social norms in relation to what bodies can do extends also to gender, which as we have seen, has become strongly implicated in the performance and training of circus bodies. Displays of acrobatic artistry mix up gender norms and re-package them for audiences. As explored earlier, female circus bodies are often strong and muscular, while male circus bodies can be gentle and elegant.⁶⁰ We have seen that it is a characteristic of Australian contemporary circus that circus bodies do not subscribe to or conform to expectations of gender. The media have often dealt with this with reference to Circus Oz’s strongwoman acts such as Anni Davey.

⁶⁰ And as cited in the Introduction, Tait describes how this occurred in nineteenth-century circus.
and Mel Fyfe, for example, “[Fyfe] knew she could take the concrete slabs because she’s had a 130kg truck driver stand on her stomach.” (Sunday Star Times, July 2007, New Zealand). Later in this chapter I discuss how resistance to gender norms is played out in the work of all male collective, Briefs Factory and in the contemporary sideshow performances in LIMBO (Strut n Fret Production House).

Highly skilled bodies have become an expected “norm” in Australian circus with the majority of artists undertaking meticulous training to develop their physical capacities and technical prowess. The refrain and the rhizomics of Chinese classical circus training bring something of a common physical language to Australian contemporary circus, so what is it that makes a particular artist or company stand out?

I argue that the leading artists and companies all possess a willingness to explore and take creative risks alongside the high degree of physical risk that circus already offers. Further, it is in my analysis the “authenticity” embedded in that risk-taking that informs the work that provides audiences with an experience that goes beyond a display of high level circus skills. Sideshow artist Captain Frodo (Frodo Santini) discussed with me his theories around the notion of authenticity in circus performance and the philosophy behind the work he has created. In doing so he explained his understanding of what makes the performer/circus artist both powerful and vulnerable at once:

The philosophical underpinnings of what we do are very deep. The performer is the one who chooses to face the other way: to stand facing everyone and to then present an idea, an emotion. And that is what holds value and that is what is real about what we do. In standing in front of a crowd and drawing out emotion, thought and feeling, that changes society in some way, even if it’s a small change. I want to say to those people who don’t see that, ‘don’t be confused because you are having a great time, and I’m having a great time’: it’s still work and it holds meaning. (Frodo Santini, Interview, May 2015)

The idea of “authenticity in performance” had been debated endlessly in performing arts scholarship, especially since the post-structuralist turn. It is not a debate I intend either to summarise or elaborate upon here. For me, Santini’s analysis is enough – those who gain a sense of authenticity in/from a performance are precisely responding to the performer’s choice to take the enormous personal risk of doing rather than watching, of facing an audience rather than being an audience. In this sense, there is an intimate relationship to be discerned between authenticity in performance and risk in performance. Spelling this out in more detail, to perform is in itself risky, and what occurs in contemporary circus – relying as it does almost entirely on the human body for its performative elements – the risks are multiplied by the nature of the
performances, which literally put the bodies of performers at risk of serious injury. At the same time, if this is combined with the creative risks that are taken in any artistic performance, then the sense of risk is intensified, and so is the feeling of having encountered authenticity. Australian contemporary circus consistently brings bodily risk and creative risk together, more often than not with political risk as well. This is what its audiences, nationally and internationally, have come to expect.

I also discussed earlier how chaos matters for circus, as part of the creative process and as part of the affective impact of performances. Not only is there the matter of artists knowingly letting go of ordered thinking in order to recognise the creative potentials, the lines of flight, that can generate from disorder, disorganisation, but there is also the extent to which many performances rely on creating a sense of disorder, disorganisation to increase the impact of riskiness. But such appearance of chaos in performance relies on a very high degree of organisation, and spit second ordering of what happens when and who does it. Performances can also produce extraordinary moments of stillness in the middle of apparent chaos.

It is very clear to me that however they are named or understood by those who direct and perform, authenticity, creative risk and chaos are all present in the work of leading Australian companies such as Circa, Casus, Briefs Factory and Gravity and Other Myths (GOM). In “Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible…” Deleuze and Guattari (1987) look to Spinoza’s concept of “what a body can do” (Spinoza 1677) to consider the affects of the body in space and time:

We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.257)

This provides a useful perspective from which to think about how risk, authenticity, rhythm, chaos and flow can combine in producing a circus body that is capable of affecting not only the other circus bodies with which it shares a stage, but also the bodies of the audience members witnessing the circus body in action. Of course, the affect of the circus body is dependent upon the creative choices made by the artist, director or both and the spatiality of the performance (as discussed in Chapter Two), nonetheless the skill of the circus body inevitably and consistently preoccupies the
majority of the audience: the hours of meticulous training remain evident regardless of
the appearance of effortlessness that the trained circus body can convey. The skills of
circus artists not only provide the artists with the capacity to “compose” something
greater than the sum of its parts, but they also evoke gasps of awe, or fear from those
who watch.

“Affects”, Deleuze and Guattari write, “are becomings”. Thus, when contemporary
circus performance is undertaken such that it simultaneously provides an experience
of authenticity and of creative and physical risk, it generates deeper becomings for the
artists and for the artform. Circus bodies have the capacity to shift the order of a space,
to dis-order and re-order it again and again within the one movement or assemblage
of movements, thus transforming it. This is directly connected to the relationship of the
performers to each other and to the circus apparatus to which they attach their physical
narrative; how they interact and create meaning from a technical, physical vocabulary
of skills; and how that vocabulary is deployed creatively.

In Relationscapes Erin Manning (2012) reminds us that movement creates the space
we encounter, “[w]e move not to populate space, not to extend it or embody it, but to
create it.” (p.1). Later she observes that, “[t]here is no ‘body itself’ here because the
body is always more than ‘itself’, always reaching toward that which it is not yet” (p.15).
This can go a long way in helping us to understand how and why the circus body is
especially central to the artistic processes of creative development and performance.
The question of circus bodies and spaces should also be thought about in relation to
degrees of becoming, or what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to as “the principle of
proximity”, suggesting that no particle is entire unto itself but always in proximal, co-
present relationship to the movement of other particles (1987, pp.272-3). The same
can be observed about sets of relations, or multiplicities, made up of several or many
becomings. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, it is the circus body that creates a space
that becomes circus, whether that be a performance space or training space, while the
material space in which circus takes place also impacts on how circus bodies produces
the space of circus. This needs to be thought about always in terms of movements,
change, degrees, proximities – including in relation to the bodies themselves. Deleuze
and Guattari, working through Spinoza, describe the body in terms of latitude and
longitude:

We can call the latitude of a body the affects of which it is capable at a
given degree of power, or within the limits of that degree. Latitude is made
up of intensive parts falling under a capacity, and longitude of extensive
parts falling under a relation. (1987, pp.256-7; emphases in original)
This understanding of the body in terms of what it can do and how it can relate is also helpful in the context of circus bodies and their relations to each other and the spaces they inhabit and transform. The process of developing authenticity and creative risk begins with the process of training the circus body to go beyond itself, in finding a connection to narrative and/or emotion, to go beyond merely repeating technique on stage. In this sense the art is always a question of becoming-otherwise. It is therefore hardly surprising that there is often a vernacular reference to “the magic of circus”. I return to this below.

**Physicality, risk and trust in “A Simple Space”**

*Gravity and Other Myths*, or *GOM* as it is known among industry peers, is an Adelaide company that was formed in 2009 by young graduates of the well-respected Cirkidz\(^{61}\). A collective of acrobats with a self-regulating creative process and autonomous company structure, they describe their work as follows: “The ensemble creates and directs their own work with emphasis on an honest approach to performance, moving away from traditional circus and theatre models, towards a fusion of acrobatic physical theatre” (Company website).

*Gravity and Other Myths* has been very successful, winning multiple awards (Best Circus Adelaide Fringe 2010, 2011, 2014; Best Circus Melbourne Fringe 2011; Ausdance Outstanding Achievement in Physical Theatre Award, 2015), consistently touring nationally and internationally, and consistently attracting five-star reviews. Here I explore the success they have had with the production “A Simple Space”. Debuting at the Adelaide Fringe Festival in 2013, it has since had numerous national and international performances, including Montreal, Edinburgh, London and tours of Germany and New Zealand.

“A Simple Space” is just that in terms of production, lighting and costumes. It has no extravagant set design, no sequins and no high-tech rigging. The stage is set with seven acrobats, one musician and one or two props. The beauty of the work lies in the fact that this is all the highly technically proficient performers need to keep audiences mesmerised, thoroughly entertained and deeply impressed for the duration of the one-hour show. A review on arts travel website *Culture Trip UK* describes it thus:

> True to its name, A Simple Space rejects the glitter and glam characteristic of circus in preference of un-embellished physical production. Australian

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\(^{61}\) See Chapter Two
acrobatic troupe Gravity and Other Myths amazes audiences as bodies are used as props in this stripped down and astounding display of near impossible physical feats, agility and sincere trust. (http://theculturetrip.com 2014)

The final words, “sincere trust”, capture the sense of authenticity and risk to which I refer above. The minimalism of the production undoubtedly contributes to GOM’s connection to its audiences, but the performers’ obvious commitment to risk, and trust in each other, are paramount. Circus relies on apparent extremes of risk-taking to set itself apart from related performing arts such as dance and theatre. In any given circus performance, traditional or contemporary, the presence of physical risk is assured. I have also noted how Australian contemporary circus often introduces an element of social/political riskiness. Tait captures all of this, and the affect of what the Culture Trip reviewer refers to as the “near impossible”, in these remarks:

Firstly, all circus performs ideas of freedom and risk but its adventurous action also defies social norms. In this way, circus acts present constant reminders that physical risks are inherently also social ones. Secondly, a perception of freedom and risk intersects in circus with a vague perception that circus artists are physically exceptional, a suspicion that they are not quite human. Risk-taking with social identity ultimately challenges even the limits of human embodiment. (2006, keynote address, ACAPTA Conference)

In “A Simple Space” the acrobats openly challenge their own capacity to maintain their focus on their embodiment and thus their safety, by, for example, handing out milk crates filled with coloured plastic balls and inviting the entire audience to hurl the balls at them during a group handstand act. From the start of the show performers launch themselves “randomly” across the stage, diving, leaping and tilting their bodies into precarious positions, loudly exclaiming, “FALLING!” as their fellow acrobats race frantically to catch them before they land face first on the stage or on another performer. This dynamic builds and builds as the skills escalate not only in risk but also in technique. They literally throw each other around or throw themselves around for the duration of the performance. Unlike the polished veneer of most physical performance, timing calls and those initiating movement are not masked; they are made loud and clear, rendering transparent the level of risk involved in the movement. GOM draws attention to risk, trust and embodiment through a transparent, meta-performative process that highlights the performative scaffolding of performance. In these ways demystifying the “magic” produced by circus skills becomes part of the production values of “A Simple Space”. In these ways GOM opens out to the audience the significance of risk, trust and embodiment in the art of circus.
One of many standout moments in the show is a back somersault challenge in which the cast undertakes a contest as to who can perform the most back somersaults in sequence without collapsing. As they throw themselves backwards into the air, one by one, a poetic movement akin to a wave pattern occurs as they follow each other one by one – flip, land, and repeat – until they can no longer continue. The balletic effect produced by this intensely physical segment requires a temporary lull in the apparent chaos that both precedes and follows it, during which many bodies move at once and from many directions. At the same time, the focused period of the contest, individual against individual, provides the audience with insight into the extreme physicality of performance as the acrobats relentlessly test the limits of their bodies as well as their mental endurance. When fatigue begins to surface, audience members witness each acrobat deliberately pushing at the edges of what a body can do.

This display of acrobatic endurance demonstrates the numerous hours of repetitive-action training that have occurred to enable the acrobats to perform a trick multiple times in sequence without injury. Farrell explains the relations between training, performance and audience like this:

Although a spectator views a performance resulting from a rehearsal, it is argued here that high skill levels and originality of an act seem perfect for the spectator who does not witness a repetitive process of enduring self-discipline over times of practice and rehearsal. The framework for how to build this practice over time is laid down by tradition, itself evolving from repetition. The spectator sees the end result removed from the core function of tradition as repetition. (Farrell, 2007, p.215)

Clearly what interests Farrell here is the part played by “tradition as repetition” and, indeed, repetition as tradition, in producing “enduring self-discipline”. In terms of the discussion I have been developing, we can note that this can also be seen in terms of the refrain, and especially how the refrains of classical/traditional circus and Chinese circus skill training continuing to inform contemporary performance.

In undertaking repetitive execution of a high-risk skill, the artists are taking not only a safety risk but an emotional risk because allowing their bodies to fatigue on stage could result in possibly undercutting their landings. All of this tests the limits of their bodies while also pushing the boundaries of what audiences might expect from a circus show: it goes beyond the “ta-da!” moment into uncomfortable territory where failure is a possibility. Authenticity is once more revealed, with the effect of a more intimate performance. Although the acrobats are presenting an “astounding display of near impossible physical feats”, they are at the same time revealing their humanness,
creating a deeper sense of connection to their audiences and vice versa. In this way the stripped down, high risk performance – which could be seen simply as an extravagant display of technical skill and strength – becomes a site in which affect comes strongly into play between those who perform and those who engage with the performance, and affect contributes as significantly to a sense of authenticity just as a sense of authenticity produces more intense affective experience. Performers and audience come to constitute a temporary assemblage through bodily, spatial and temporal exchanges of affective relations. Although each person remains open to whatever other affects s/he brought into this space, each trailing his or her individual and shared rhizomics of expectations, preconceptions, memories, desires and so on, for now audience and performers are in a zone of proximity: they have entered into proximal relations with each other.

This experience is strongly reinforced by the creative risk GOM takes in avoiding entrances and exits for the acts in the show. Obviously this builds on the transparency of performance quality for which the company has become renowned, however it also reinforces the affective intensity. No one leaves the stage. All seven acrobats remain on stage for the duration of the show and rarely stop moving. Even when the focus is directed towards one or two of the performers, the others are always on stage and remain connected via their eye contact with each other and overall connection to the extraordinary degree of physicality that unfurls in performance. There is a sureness of presence within the ensemble that constitutes a steady link even when their bodies are not physically connected by touching: the performers maintain an energy that connects them and reminds us that as an ensemble they are unshakeably allied. Further, an embodied intimacy is rendered more apparent through the percussive nature of the embodied performance, which is reinforced by the bodily rhythms engendered as they move together and independently across the performance space. Audience members are drawn into this intimacy even as they are inevitably, as “audience”, outside of it – although, as discussed below, GOM’s audience is seated much closer than most.

**Physical risk**

A fundamental characteristic of trust is the performer’s relationship to the unknown, exemplified by his or her letting go and giving in to the body’s movement in space. In the context of circus, the element of the unknown is minimised by the extensive training and numerous hours spent standing on each other’s bodies, falling off and leaping onto each other. Through this, a deeper, knowing connection develops beyond trust: it becomes an embodiment not only of the circus skill involved, but of the movement of
the other bodies within that skilled moment. This involves knowing where the hands will be that catch you; adjusting your stance to accommodate an over- or under-rotation of a front ‘sault in order to put your shoulders right where the flyer needs them to be to land safely each time. Through this embodied connection a rhythm of bodies is produced. They compensate for and counteract each other’s technical errors so that they are never truly errors, only a meeting of bodies in space and time to execute something that they have done numerous times before, but which is often slightly altered in order to minimise risk for each other.

The simplicity of GOM’s staging and framework, combined with the complexity of their acrobatic technique, demonstrates how simplicity and complexity complement each other to create fluidity in the performance space. This is true of all performance, but it becomes more obvious when GOM strips it down to the bare essentials. A significant proportion of “A Simple Space” consists of group acrobatics in which the artists use the bodies of the other cast members as something akin to stepping stones and landing points. In group acrobatics, technical precision is essential as you relinquish the safety of your body to your troupe. As the flyer you can control your body tension and initiate your rotation or acceleration, and beyond that you must rely on your base/s to pitch you, catch you or spin you sufficiently. For GOM, a lack of apparatus highlights simplicity but allows bodily complexity to occur through intuitive movements and extraordinary transitions across the performance space. The nuances in GOM’s work emphasise the importance of embodiment and trust in circus. As an ensemble they can be understood to embody each other, and in performance they frequently undertake moves that involve a significant degree of becoming-other. In these ways a deeper level of skill in performance is enabled.

Jondi Keane’s (2009) work on embodied cognition invites us to consider the relations-between the characteristics of the body in space and touch, and the subtle and nuanced movements in the body. “Embodied cognition, and perception in particular,” he writes, “consists of movements-within-movement that twist, contort and shift the gross and subtle connections and relationships previously held in place” (Keane, 2009, p.19). The “movements-within-movement” that occur in “A Simple Space” articulate the finer details in the acrobats’ connections to their own bodies and to the bodies occupying the space around them, both those of the other cast members and those of the audience. “A Simple Space” is performed in an intimate setting with the audience in close proximity. This creative choice to position the audience almost within the performance space removes the fourth wall that theatre so often relies on, and further
enhances the level of intimacy between performers and audience members, and vice versa. Reviews of “A Simple Space” regularly refer to the rawness of the performance quality and the transparency of process. Vocal grunts are openly expressed and another creative choice to avoid the use of heavy make-up means that sweat is visible. The extreme effort of the body is exposed, rather than concealed:

The audience is seated on three sides, so close to the action you can almost feel every deep, guttural breath. And that only makes this show even more terrifyingly, jaw-droppingly impressive. (expressco.uk)

Nevertheless, each acrobat remains focused and centred on what his or her body needs to do – where it needs to move to and who it is connecting with to make that journey: the rhythm of bodies is thus extended into the audience despite the apparent self-possession of each acrobat. Keane recognises such moments in physical performance as examples of embodied cognition, suggesting that when the performance of the body carries with it micro movements that represent emotion, it then holds the ability to change the perception of the body for spectators – altering perceptions of what bodies can be and what they convey.

Some performers, using images, emotions and specific intentions, create dispositions through micro movement in the body that appear in and through all their movements. In this way, cognition is a special type of movement that runs through the body, interacts with the surroundings and feeds back into the micro movements of perception. (Keane, 2009, pp.1-2)

Taking into consideration the added layer of an intimate audience at close vicinity to the bodies of GOM, it is clear that the movements of the bodies, though exceptional in their artistic athleticism, are not solely responsible for the success of the performance. The artists produce affective connections in, with and through their bodies – connections with themselves, with each other and with audiences. Every expression of exertion, pain, fatigue and elation is a micro movement that produces sensory and emotional responses, which “run through” the performance for all who experience it. There are many implications of this for how audiences understand authenticity in performance and how they experience degrees of intimacy with the performers. For performers undertaking high levels of risk, micro movements are crucial. Whether imperceptible or perceptible to audiences, they occur as signals, corrections, calls and responses that are always perceptible to performers, and they are indicative of becomings involved in the rhythm of bodies that emerges in group acrobatics as undertaken by GOM.
Space and time are highly influential in how such a rhythm of bodies occurs in contemporary circus and in how the performance is received or read. Coleman (2011) explains that

...‘things’ – bodies – cannot exist independently but rather are constituted through their relations with other things... However, bodies, in a Deleuzian sense, refer not necessarily to human entities but to a multiple and diverse series of connections which assemble as a particular spatial and temporal moment. (Coleman, 2011, pp. 150-151)

The bodies of the GOM acrobats and their movements plug into each other to generate an assemblage: several-bodies-becoming-one-body moving together through space and time. For audiences, such a movement-of-artists is usually perceived as “an artistic moment”, which, knowingly or not, signals the importance of time-perception in enabling a sense of movement through space and, simultaneously, the importance of movement-perception in enabling a sense of movement through time (as well as our perception of the time passing). Here it is extremely useful to revisit Manning’s observation, cited earlier, that we “move not to populate space, not to extend it or embody it, but to create it” (2009, p.1). Space-creation-through-movement is what GOM do incredibly well, and in my analysis they do it so well because they are aware that it is what they are doing. This meta-performativity and creation of space through movement is also present in their other work, such as their earliest work “Freefall” (2009) and more recently, “Backbone”.62

By connecting their bodies across the space, through moving around and across other bodies and relying on the bodies of the ensemble to make a creative/physical choice to move as one, the acrobats create an assemblage of bodies-as-art. The metacognition of movement, in Keane’s sense, that characterises their performances arises from endless hours of training to create a bodily precision which in turn delivers a level of embodiment that goes beyond expectations of “performing” an acrobatic sequence. Their exceptionally rigorous degree of training frees them from the need to concentrate on how to do what they are doing, individually and together, so that they are able to allow the experience of becoming-other to fold and unfold in performance. This, in turn, enables a greater alertness to the micro movements of their own bodies and those of the rest of the cast, as well as to other modes of relational communication

62 While “Backbone” utilises more props than their previous work, there are no “obvious” circus apparatus used and it remains clear that the creation of narrative in the performance relies on the movement of bodies in space.
that can emerge in ensemble work at such an exceptional level\(^{63}\). To bring Keane’s insights into contact with Deleuze and Guattari, GOM’s extraordinary training facilitates openness to affect, which far from being potentially distracting becomes integral to performance. They are alert to ways in which to “enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body…to join with it in creating a more powerful body” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 257, cited in more detail above). When we encounter this kind of fluid interaction in which multiplicity is creatively productive to such a degree that it seems to operate as one thing, we are encountering something akin to what Deleuze and Guattari call a “plane of immanence, univocality, composition upon which everything is given, upon which unformed elements and materials dance that are distinguished from one another only by their speed and that enter into this or that individuated assemblage depending on their connections, their relations of movement” (1987, p.255). It is important to notice that this is not a description of a unity, which they distrust – as a transcendent Plane, a god-plane, an origin, a matter of processes of either/or rather than and…and…and.... A plane of immanence remains a multiplicity, which can thus make other multiplicities.

Having introduced the plane of immanence, Deleuze and Guattari move quickly to how “individuated assemblages” can come about, paying particular attention to the idea of the fold. This matters for the effects/affects I want to understand in discussing such extraordinary performances. Deleuze and Guattari observe that “…for the vertebrate to become an Octopus or Cuttlefish, all it would have to do is fold itself in two fast enough to fuse the elements of the halves of its back together, then bring its pelvis up to the nape of its neck and gather its limbs together into one of its extremities…” (p.255). It possibly occurred to them that some of us might find this difficult to imagine, so by way of immediate explication, they cite an example from Saint-Hilaire. It is interesting that the example they choose is from circus, in the form of an acrobatic clown or a clowning acrobat. It is followed by an explanation of the fold as they deploy that idea in relation to the plane of immanence:

\[ \text{...like 'a clown who throws his head and shoulders back and walks on his head and hands.'}\]\(^{64}\) Plication. It is no longer a question of organs and functions, and of a transcendent Plane that can preside over their

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\(^{63}\) And GOM’s work is certainly exceptional. “A Simple Space”, for example, has toured internationally since 2013 and is still touring; has received multiple national and international awards; and the company’s home page lists 14 “five star” reviews.

\(^{64}\) Etienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1930) \textit{Principes de philosophie zoologique}. This might translate as “Principles of a zoological philosophy”. A little later they deal with their famous example from von Uexkull of the ways in which the tick makes an affective assemblage with the tree from which it drops and the animal it parasitizes, and explain that “this kind of study is called ethology” (1987, p.257)
organization only by means of analogical relations and types of divergent development. It is a question not of organization but of movement and rest, speed and slowness. It is a question of elements and particles, which do or do not arrive fast enough to effect a passage, a becoming or jump on the same plane of pure immanence. And if there are in fact jumps, rifts between assemblages, it is not by virtue of their essential irreducibility but rather because there are always elements that do not arrive on time, or arrive after everything is over; thus it is necessary to pass through fog, to cross voids, to have lead times and delays, which are themselves part of the plane of immanence. Even the failures are part of the plane. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.255; emphasis in original)

What this provides is a means to think about how the “breathtaking” performance has become what it is becoming as we watch. Prior to this creative “moment” there have been countless hours of training, many mis-timings, late arrivals, just-in-time arrivals, bruises and sprains, struggles to “make it work” and sudden inspirations (“lines of flight”?), failures and successes. This is why in the “moment of performance”, the micro movements are read, bodies are becoming-each-other, and even the potential to fail, or actual failures, become part of the performance which is consistently breathtaking, exhilarating, exciting for those who watch and, indeed, those who perform. It matters that once they are on that plane on which it seems as if anything might be possible, acrobats are in fact freed from consciousness of how they are doing what they are doing, so that, as I suggested above, they can be as open as possible to what is immanent in or to that plane which is also at the same time the space that their movements are creating. Folding and unfolding. Plication.

When acrobats deliver a performance that is so powerfully embodied that they could be mentally compiling a shopping list while executing a dangerous and highly skilled trick, this is often described as flowing from “muscle memory”. As Tait explains:

The phrase ‘muscular memory’ or ‘muscle memory’ (Grayland, 2004) is … widely used in conversation by young aerial performers in Australia to describe how the body acquires bodily skills and heightened physical action through practice and repetition. Therefore if a muscular body can be trained to develop a memory for action on its own accord, what does the performer think about or remember – what goes through the mind – during the performance? (Tait, 2005, p.1)

The answer, of course, needs to be the something like: the “mind” as embodied cognition, “runs through the body, interacts with the surroundings and feeds back into the micro movements of perception” as Keane put it, and perhaps if we understand embodied cognition working in these ways, ensemble performers are at the same time interacting with the embodied experiences of the rest of cast. I realise there is a risk
this could be seen as another kind of “transcendence” when, like Keane and in other ways, Manning, I mean it as exactly not that.

The simplicity of GOM’s production aesthetic allows its audience to share in the complexities of trained circus bodies in action. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi argues that the complexities of creative people allow them to go beyond themselves in discovering the possibilities of their chosen field:

Are there then no traits that distinguish creative people? If I had to express one word that makes their personalities different from others, it would be complexity. By this I mean that they show tendencies of thought and action that in most people are segregated. They contain contradictory extremes – instead of being an ‘individual’, each of them is a ‘multitude.’ Like the color white that includes all the hues in the spectrum, they tend to bring together the entire range of human possibilities within themselves. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.57)

Creativity in contemporary circus is where simplicity, complexity and chaos meet fluidity, control and embodied cognition to produce a rhythm of bodies. The creative chaos of circus creates a space where possibilities of the body can be explored in their most extreme forms. This becomes apparent in the darker and at times particularly disturbing performances of contemporary sideshow.

**Contemporary sideshow in Australia: beyond the gore and glitter**

The unexplainable has a palpable, real power on human beings, to such an extent that whether the secret hidden in the mystery is real or not, it does not diminish its power. (Captain Frodo, illuminated showman.com)

The sideshow or “freak show” has been around in European cultures at least since the 1600s, when street performers who were considered “freaks”, “abnormal”, “beast-like” etc., were displayed for the enjoyment of the passing public. It soon became a staple of the travelling circus, where the freak show was often a huge drawcard. Billed as “oddities”, “monsters” and “God's mistakes”, midgets, bearded ladies, Siamese twins, tattooed women and anyone else who was unusual and strange, along with malformed animals (alive or dead) were put on display for circus crowds to “enjoy” or “thrill to”. They traditionally brought in “big bucks” for the proprietors of travelling circuses.

The sideshow we see in contemporary circus is vastly different to the days when people were “sold” or “given” to the circus, having no real choice over whether they were happy to be on display for their “irregularities”. Today’s performers have placed themselves on show. They have either developed skills or modified their bodies in
ways that help them become “Other”. Contemporary sideshow is not about exploitation: it is about performance, and questioning the social and physical boundaries of the body. Australian sideshow performers are some of the most revered in the world. Many hold Guinness world records and headline major festivals internationally. I am interested in exploring how contemporary sideshow enables performers to provoke the ordinary by being extraordinary, and thus question social and cultural norms. I am also interested in the impact that sideshow has had on the development of contemporary circus in Australia.

The first contemporary incarnation of sideshow performance in Australia came from a collective known as The Happy Sideshow. Formed in 1998, The Happy Sideshow consisted of The Space Cowboy (Chayne Hulgren), Shep Huntly, Captain Frodo (Frodo Santini) and Tiger Lil (Lil Crump). The company toured consistently during their time together65 performing the traditional sideshow stunts of sword swallowing, knife throwing and contortion alongside more contemporised stunts such as nailing their tongues to tables and piercing their eyelids with fishhooks. Although that sounds grotesque, The Happy Sideshow performed their version of the sideshow with frivolity and positivity, with the tagline, “Things just get better!” Their shows were packaged in an upbeat style that invited the audience to laugh while they were potentially squirming at the dangerous and at times relatively gruesome nature of the acts. Frodo Santini discussed with me the collective’s desire to keep the performances light-hearted:

That dark style of sideshows, we didn’t necessarily identify with. We saw our work more so as: ‘ah it’s so cool that you can push yourself to do these full-on things’. The most important part of it for us was more the ‘Look how awesome this is! Or look how full-on and painful this is!’ and that’s the angle most go for, but that is in the trick itself already – if you put a nail up your nose, that’s the reaction that you will automatically get, so you don’t really have to amplify it. So with The Happy Sideshow we had this idea of trying to create a show that made the audience feel what we felt about these things. What we wanted to make was a show that wasn’t just grotesque but a happy kind of sideshow and we couldn’t really find a name for it, so that description became the name of the show. And people in reviews would comment at the time: ‘Isn’t that a sort of dichotomy – that it’s called the happy sideshow?’ And we would respond with: ‘Yeah! That’s kind of the point!’ Because what we were all about was turning these deformities of the body into a celebration as opposed to just shock value. (Frodo Santini, Interview, May 2015)

65 The Happy Sideshow collective toured their work nationally and internationally until 2005 (Frodo Santini, Interview, 2015).
In 2000 *The Happy Sideshow* returned to Melbourne after touring Europe to perform their first theatre-style show entitled “Educational Torture” a narrative-based work which was set in a classroom and featured two live musicians. The show explored a history of torture from stoning to electrocution, with *The Happy Sideshow* acting out the historical torture methods on stage, with a fourth wall format. “Educational Torture” was the first and only narrative work that the collective created, and was far darker than their cabaret style format of a typical *Happy Sideshow* performance, which proved to have more marketability. They continued to tour to Glastonbury and Edinburgh Fringe Festival and in 2001 found themselves with the opportunity to extend their networks, as Santini explained:

We did a late-night spot at a club during the [Melbourne] comedy festival and Rove was there from the Rove Live TV show which was really big at the time and he loved it and approached us straight after the show asking us to do a spot to his show the following week. So we did, and he plugged the show for us. We only had one show left so that just exploded and was completely sold out. Scott Maidment, who had already heard of us, came to that last show. And at that point I think we actually had Derek Ives in the show for that season as a guest performer doing some material. Scott told us he wanted to produce our show and help us get more tours, which was great for us as we wanted to tour more internationally. Scott got us into the Assembly Rooms and we had the most successful season we had ever had at Edinburgh Fringe. We had Scott as a producer for a few years, until around 2004. (Interview Frodo Santini May 2015)

*The Happy Sideshow* disbanded the following year, although all of the artists are still working in Australian contemporary circus and have collaborated on projects from time to time. The Space Cowboy has had enormous success and won multiple awards for his solo work including: Street Performance World Champion (Dublin, Ireland. 2006, 2007 & 2011) and Street Performer of the year 1998-2006 ('Three Weeks', Edinburgh Festival Magazine). He holds fifty-four Guinness World Records for extreme physical feats. Scott Maidment retains his interest in sideshow, programming the artform in his Festival venues and in his work as creative director at *Strut n Fret Production House*.

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66 Rove Live was an Australian commercial television comedy/variety program featuring comedian Rove McManus.
Paradoxes of female fragility in Strut n Fret’s “LIMBO”

Here I focus on a burlesque beauty/sideshow star from New York who audiences have loved in the award-winning Australian circus show “LIMBO”. Heather Holliday was the youngest sword swallower in the world when she first began performing at Coney Island’s “Sideshow by the Seashore” at the age of 17. She attended the Coney Island sideshow school and was one of the first female sword swallowers to do a “glam routine” that didn’t focus purely on the grotesque, instead mixing the bizarre with her beauty. When Holliday first began performing, her stage persona was extremely alternative in the familiar gothic-grotesque style of sideshow performance. However, after touring with a modern burlesque troupe called “The Pretty Peepers” she was inspired to create a persona that utilised her beauty rather than apologised for it. Interestingly, though, Heather Holliday remarked in an interview that her beauty, or what she terms her “performance of beauty”, can provoke an audience response that suggests it is either a threat or at least somewhat unsettling:

Half the time, when a couple comes to the show, they want to see some weird shit. They're like, 'this is going to be a hoot.' They aren't expecting a pretty girl, or anything they perceive as a threat. Then the girlfriend ends up saying 'you better not like that' and the guy is not going to clap or act
enthusiastic, because otherwise he'll hear about it later. I once had a girl
cover her boyfriend’s eyes. I’m just an entertainer. I’m not there to threaten
anybody. All I want is to go out on stage and make people happy.
(Interview: therumpus.net May 28, 2010)

Would the girlfriend feel more comfortable with her partner watching Heather swallow
a sword if Heather had kept her grotesque stage persona? It seems that there are
people who prefer sideshow artists to stay (oddly enough) comfortably in the category
of the grotesque, which explains why they are disturbed when someone who looks as
beautiful as Heather Holliday effortlessly holds five razor-sharp swords in her throat at
once or breathes flames three feet high like a mythical dragon. Many audience
members are shocked or intimidated. It seems that in taking on power in her own body
and pushing its limits, Heather can become confronting to a general audience. She is
blurring the lines of what female bodies can, or should, do, and presenting her own
version of “beauty”. Many people find this hard to accept from a “pretty girl”.
Nevertheless, in “LIMBO”, Australian audiences responded enthusiastically to
Heather’s persona/performance. Perhaps this is because the propensity of Australian
contemporary circus and sideshow to teeter on the brink of the extreme, to be edgy
and challenging, has educated Australian audiences to expect the unexpected in such
performances.

In “Abject Bodies: Beckett, Orlan, Stelarc and the politics of contemporary performance”
Kathy Smith (2007) observes that:

Contemporary performance constantly challenges boundaries and limits of
understanding, constantly questions the dynamics, the politics of the body
– the relationship of the material body to discursive formations in currency,
the dynamic, constantly shifting relationship between
performance/representation, the culture which both accommodates and
provokes the representation, and the spectating subject. (Smith, 2007, p.1)

We cannot come to a firm conclusion as to why audience members can be so readily
challenged by Heather Holliday’s “glam” sideshow act. It seems, though, that they are
unsure how to interpret it due to entrenched social and cultural codes about “pretty
girls” and what they should or should not be able to do, or at the least, what it is or is
not appropriate for them to do. In the light of my earlier discussion of women’s circus
and how it challenged norms of femininity, it would be easy to assume that we should
be “past all that stereotyping”. However, let us not forget the re-emergence of the pretty
woman who doesn’t challenge those stereotypes in the form of the girl in the red dress,
and the gender imbalance in too many circus companies. It may well be the case that
negative reactions to Heather’s act are the sideshow equivalent of that trend; that due
to how certain kinds of female “beauty” are valorised in “celebrity culture” combined with a social media-driven “backlash” against feminism, a proportion of audience members are shocked by an act in which a woman who meets the expected definition of feminine beauty does hard core sideshow stunts like breathing fire and swallowing multiple swords with perfect pin curls and winged eyeliner. Of course – the pin curls and the hyper-feminised costumes, the bubble gum blowing “girlish” demeanour, might well give the act away as parody of the same cultural norms that are causing the shock. Ironically, Heather’s pretty girl act becomes more grotesque in this unexpected situation than when she actually invited such an interpretation through gothic-grotesque make-up, costuming etc.

Another factor in the added shock value of the pretty girl act could be that the high levels of risk involved in the act also throw into question any initial impression of an attractive, petite woman as an object to be gazed at for its own sake. Her presentation and demeanour are completely at odds with her performance, and mean to be, which disturbs processes of embodied meaning-making. Grosz observes that:

Bodies speak, without necessarily talking, because they become coded with and as signs. They speak social codes. They become intextuated, narrativized: simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms, and ideals become incarnated. (Grosz, 1995, p.35)

If a body’s behaviour is completely at odds with how it invites certain preconceptions, the impact can be very disturbing indeed for people who expect the performativity of bodies to accord with the codes they incarnate. Heather Holliday misbehaves in several ways. By refusing the usual signs and codes of the body as “sideshow freak”, and choosing to be intextuated as part of the conventional feminine story, as a sideshow artist she manipulates and stretches social codes and norms to breaking point, and beyond for some audience members.

In 2013 Heather Holliday was cast in “LIMBO”, a show created by Strut n Fret Production House. For the first half of the show, Heather accompanies lead tap dancer Hilton Dennis and busts out a highly skilled tap dance duo, but other than that she is mainly in the background, which sets her up to be perceived simply as “eye candy”. However, she has such a stage presence that one tap dance and taking a background role would be enough for her to steal the show, in an incredible cast that features some of Australia’s and Europe’s finest circus artists.
In an interview *Strut n Fret* creative director, Scott Maidment, spoke about how he sets out to showcase the impossible as possible:

In ‘LIMBO’, in particular, that was really one of the things that I wanted to try to do: I wanted people to sing and dance and do acrobatics and beat-boxing and then do tap dancing, then swallow a sword. I think that’s one of the things that audiences like, they think: ‘oh, they have two arms and two legs just like me but they’re amazing, they’re doing amazing things.’ So I am invigorated by that kind of energy, because I think that there is some part of the audience that thinks ‘that could be me!’ They want to see the ‘impossible’ but they kind of know that it *is* possible. (Scott Maidment, Interview, November 2015)

As “LIMBO” progresses, Holliday’s skill set is revealed and she has the audience in the palm of her hand, which is as Maidment planned it. He saw her in a burlesque stage show in New York and cast her immediately. He wanted the audience to think she was merely a pretty showgirl, and then amaze them with her extreme act. The other woman artist in the show, Evelyn Allard, is presented in a similar manner: she flies under the radar, as it were, until midway through, when she suddenly performs a highly skilled, fluid and amazing aerial ring act that relies on huge amounts of physical strength and high pain thresholds, again defying the idea of delicate femininity. Judith Butler famously argues that:

> Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way. (Butler, 1988, p.528)

The women artists in “LIMBO”, and their artistic director, are working with a preconceived idea of femininity and performing it with a circus twist that turns it on its head. “LIMBO” has been touring constantly since it first opened at the Adelaide Fringe Festival in 2013. There have been extensive European tours and 2018 will mark its third season at the Adelaide Fringe. For a show to play the same festival multiple times is extremely rare; for a show to sell out each time is even rarer. Heather Holliday is one of the drawcards. These repeat audiences clearly enjoy how her performance challenges conventional ideas of what women’s bodies can do by parodying what petite pinup-girl bodies can do. Holliday repackages the package, and as a result invites the audience to question their surprise, which rests on an initial impression that she wouldn’t be capable of such acts. I have frequently experienced this as a trapeze artist. As a woman in my thirties, I am often told that I am “strong for a girl”, and “especially for a short girl”.
In relation to theoretical reconsiderations of embodied subjectivity, Grosz argues that:

This re-thinking of the body has implications well beyond the disciplinary interests of philosophy: it implies that the ways in which we understand subjectivity, and its co-implicated terms – space and time, materiality, exchange, knowledge, power, pleasure, social and cultural production – must themselves be transformed. (Grosz, 1995, p.2)

Circus has demonstrated a capacity, and readiness, to transform social constraints regarding gender expectations and norms, and, indeed, to jettison them completely. While I have described in the previous chapter a relatively recent trend running counter to this capacity in the form of the under-representation of women in some companies, it is to be hoped that “the girl in the red dress” continues to be undone, including by parodies of such representations of “girls”. Women who undertake unexpected feats call on audiences to re-think their ideas about bodies; to “un-do” the codes and signs that try to delineate boundaries around what bodies are capable of according to the gender they are assigned, their size, their abilities, and the extent to which they do, or don’t, meet certain preconceptions of beauty or power.

*Benjamin Lewis and The Great Gordo Gamsby*

In contemporary circus, rethinking of the body can be provoked through sideshow performances in which audiences are presented with extreme displays of pain and modifications of the body to achieve certain tricks or stunts. In part of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) discussion of the Body without Organs (BwO) there is a focus on masochism. The question needs to be asked: Is the circus body, and more specifically, the sideshow body, a masochistic body?

After all, is not Spinoza’s *Ethics* the great book of the BwO? The attributes are types or genuses of BwO’s, substances, powers, zero intensities as matrices of production. The modes are everything that comes to pass: waves and vibrations, migrations, thresholds and gradients, intensities produced in a given type of substance starting from a given matrix. The masochist body as an attribute or genus of substance, with its production of intensities and pain modes based on its degree of being sewn up. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.153)

In 2010 I witnessed an “edge of your seat” moment of contemporary sideshow, a world-first sideshow stunt, and a performance that could readily be described as masochistic in that it involved extreme, self-inflicted pain and was literally death-defying by choice. *The League of Sideshow Superstars* were in the middle of their season in The Garden of Unearthly Delights when they decided to try out a new act. It was to be a world first, never been done before. Word spread around the Garden of Unearthly Delights and
the Adelaide Fringe. The sideshow was already sold out for the night, and the
performers were busy making arrangements to fit in all of the extras who had heard
about the new stunt and were keen to witness it. So when the curtain rose, not only
were the seating banks full of the usual festival spectators, but peeking out from behind
the wings, the sides of the stage, the front of house, was every circus performer who
happened to be at the festival that year and not actually performing at the same time,
along with directors, producers and front of house workers. The atmosphere was thick
with anticipation, excitement and (particularly among the circus people) more than a
touch of fear. It hadn't even been rehearsed.

I discussed in Chapter Two how the Garden of Unearthly Delights can be understood
as heterotopic space that provides an opportunity for artists to explore the more
experimental potentials of their work. In Foucault’s analysis,

> [t]he heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several
spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that
the theatre brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a
whole series of places that are foreign on a two dimensional screen, one
sees the projection of a three-dimensional space; but perhaps the oldest
example of these heterotopias that take form of contradictory sites is the
garden. (Foucault, 1986, p.25)

Of course, circuses are themselves heterotopic on several axes or plateaus or strata.
They are nomadic spaces populated by a wide range of creative, skilled and eccentric
people who perform different roles and different acts in different combinations, yet they
are largely continuous as performance companies and as communities. They are,
however, entirely transitory in relation to the other places/spaces in which they appear
for a single performance or for a few days or weeks, bringing their eccentricities to
disrupt, attract, entertain and astonish the continuities of the community into which they
temporarily irrupt. That is, circuses are heterotopic in terms of subjectivities, situations,
temporality and spatiality, and their heterotopic characteristics vary depending on
whether one is located within a circus company, or a visitor to one which is visiting
one’s locale. The Garden of Unearthly Delights presents an intensification of the
heterotopic circus space: with multiple venues and sites within The Garden, it is thus
creating a multiplicity of virtual worlds within one space. Such a space is what makes
possible the kind of “world first” sideshow stunt that I explore here. The spectacle was
performed by two well-known circus artists, aerialist Benjamin Lewis (Flying Fruit Fly
Circus, Briefs, Club Swizzle, “Tom Tom Crew”) and sideshow strongman Gordo
Gamsby (The Dirty Brothers, The League of Sideshow Superstars).
Pre-show, Gamsby had his upper back pierced with two large weight-bearing hooks. During the show he was strung upside down, hanging by one foot in an aerial foot loop. Lewis’s aerial straps\textsuperscript{67} apparatus was clipped into the weight-bearing hooks in Gamsby’s back. Gamsby was counterweighted by a circus rigger, upward to a height of approximately 6-8 metres with Lewis hanging from his aerial straps, attached to Gamsby’s back. And as if that wasn’t enough in itself, Lewis then performed several aerial acrobatic tricks while Gamsby hung silent, basing Lewis’s apparatus with the hooks in his back.

With this we clearly move into the realm of the most “cringe-worthy” sideshow acts, the ones that audiences can readily find it physically uncomfortable to watch. The collective audience gasps during the performance were accompanied by a palpable, shared feeling of apprehension and by the (guilty) thrill of being witness to such a thing. As a long-term contemporary circus practitioner, and as an aerialist, I readily confess that I held my breath, as I am sure did the other circus and sideshow people present that night. The intensity of my physical response was doubtless increased by the knowledge that there was no illusion involved (as in a conjuring trick), and by my familiarity with the risk involved in any “regular” aerial act. I recognised the many possible opportunities for error or injury that might occur in this stunt: if the hooks tear from Gamsby’s back, then Lewis would plummet to ground head first, and Gamsby would be left hanging from one foot, bleeding from torn back muscles… However, none of this happened, the stunt was a massive success, and both performers arrived safely on the ground, with not a drop of blood in sight. The duo went on to perform this trick on two more occasions at similar festival venues in Australia.

With their extreme performance of the sideshow and circus body, acts such as this explore the boundaries of what is or isn’t taboo as entertainment by pushing the degree of physical risk-taking. Spectators, who have shared in the thrill of the risk involved, are nevertheless often provoked to wonder, “why on earth would you try that?” and further, “what makes a person decide to do that?” and finally, “how is that person able to push his or her body through such pain?”

Apart from producing a memorable moment in circus and sideshow history, Gamsby and Lewis are re-telling the story of what bodies can do. They envision an opportunity to reach for the limits of their own bodily capacities, and they go there – indeed, they hang, tumble, even dance there, with others looking on. Clearly such performers share

\textsuperscript{67} Aerial straps are used in similar style to the Roman rings apparatus in Gymnastics.
a desire to push their own physical experience to and even beyond their levels of endurance, and in doing so they also challenge the capacities of their audiences to witness an act that clearly involves what must be genuine pain.

Recalling Foucault’s perspectives on the disciplined body, and Seidenstein’s observations about circus performers’ bodies reaching for “authenticity” (see Chapter One), the sideshow body does not become in any way docile, but it certainly becomes more tolerant of pain and more useful to the performer. To imagine such an extreme performance is neither unexpected nor perverse in the contexts of circus and sideshow, which rely for their impact on producing intense affects. However, since these sideshow artists regularly give performances that elicit very strong audience responses, there can be little question that to act upon this imagining requires productive desire – that is, desire for its own sake and to its own ends – to undertake an embodied experience that pushes physical limits in ways that not only override conventional notions of what a body can or can’t, should or shouldn’t do, but also what others think you should or shouldn’t do to your body. The shared experience between performers and audience therefore becomes intensely personal in a way that simultaneously requires a high degree of de-personalisation. To tolerate the pain and risk involved, the embodied performers must to a significant degree enter a zone that is effectively and affectively dis-embodied. Audience members, in their desire to experience the thrill of witnessing such a performance, must try to view and experience it as performance, rather than apprehending their own embodied presence as willing complicity in others’ endurance of extreme suffering and danger. Performers and audience are therefore oddly bonded in enacting desires, albeit of differing kinds.

This performance speaks directly to the concept of the Body without Organs. On the basis of desire, a BwO has chosen its own way of being and becoming.

The BwO is the field of immanence of desire, the plane of consistency specific to desire (with desire defined as a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it). (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.154; emphasis in original)

The desire to push limits both physical and social puts sideshow artists and their bodies into relations with Otherness. By acting on their productive desire to perform extreme stunts, by seeking the un-done state of a BwO, they place themselves outside accepted bodily and thus social margins.
Gordo and Ben’s performance clearly has affinities with the work of Australian performance artist Stelarc, who undertakes various body modifications and interactions with technologies and apparatus. Stelarc’s work has achieved international prominence, with the most recent extensive scholarly coverage being Anne Marsh’s book, *Performance Ritual Document* (2014). At its simplest, and particularly confronting, level his work has involved using multiple hooks to hang his naked body from the ceilings of art galleries. Stelarc’s exhibitions of risk, pain and resilience are referenced but also greatly amplified because the hooks in Gordo’s back bear the weight of another grown man. In several of Stelarc’s works he has attached himself to apparatus that cause pain and to technologies that invite and enable remote viewers to intensify his suffering. In Gamsby and Lewis’s performance, however, another person, another feeling body, is directly involved in the intensification of pain for the person attached to the source of pain, while the high level of risk is extended to both. In such ways, circus/sideshow bodies certainly ask us to reconsider our perceptions of what is physically possible, however they also frequently inscribe themselves with social or political intentions and intensities.

Grosz argues that we are all to greater or lesser extents implicated in bodily inscription:

> Less openly violent but no less coercive are the inscriptions of cultural and personal values, norms, and commitments according to the morphology and categorization of the body into socially significant groups – male and female, black and white, and so on. The body is involuntarily marked, but it is also incised through ‘voluntary’ procedures, life-styles, habits, and behaviours. (Grosz, 1994, pp.141-142)

When we gasp at the willingness of sideshow bodies to endure risk and pain, we could notice that our own bodies are subject to many forms of intervention, both everyday and occasional. That is, beyond the question of what bodies can do, we can find ourselves thinking about how much bodies can bear – the bodies of others and also our own. Sideshow extremes might be viewed as exhibitions of suffering. On the contrary, though, the operation of desire in the space of performance means that they can readily be understood as celebrations of endurance as potential, and thus of the reality of the possible. In *Spinoza and Practical Philosophy*, Deleuze (1970) writes:

> Concretely, if you define bodies and thoughts as capacities for affecting and being affected, many things change. You will define an animal, or a human being, not by its form, its organs and its function, and not as subject either; you will define it by the affects of which it is capable. (1970, p.124)
This is a very significant reminder that how experiences and actions are understood depends on the perspective we take on any body, any experience. The masochistic body, like the sadistic body and the paranoid body, is a body that is looking to extreme strategies of suffering to become a BwO, but it is doing so in order fill a fundamental lack. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) ask in relation to various famous descriptive examples of such bodies, “[w]hy such a dreary parade of sucked-dry, catatonicized, vitrified, sewn-up bodies, when the BwO is also full of gaiety, ecstasy, and dance?” (1987, p.150). There is no question of the sideshow body being “defined” as a masochistic body if it is understood in terms of productive desire, performance and “capacities for affecting or being affected”. Desire, for the sideshow body, consists in the exploration of the possible, even to “dance” – or in this case, do acrobatics – while hanging from hooks in another’s body, and to experience the “ecstasy” of overcoming the pain involved in being the body through which the hooks have been placed and from which another’s body hangs. What people remember about Gordo and Ben’s performance is precisely the affects of which those bodies were capable.

**Briefs: Bending gender in contemporary circus.**

In the back of a retro bookshop in the Brisbane bohemian suburb of West End in 2008, some ripples appeared that eventually impelled change in the Brisbane contemporary circus scene. With the formation of Briefs Factory (often referred to as Briefs) a new line of flight emerged from the Brisbane milieu, disturbing the relatively established sense of what circus in Brisbane was or could be and pushing Australian contemporary circus into places it had not previously discovered. An all-male mash-up of circus, vaudeville, drag and burlesque, the original line up for Briefs featured some of Brisbane’s most prolific and talented contemporary circus artists. Their work is edgy, risqué, highly skilled and not for the faint hearted. As a “local” circus artist, I have been privileged to witness the successful journey of Briefs from the very first show in 2008, which was a slapped-together, speakeasy-vaudeville mixed bag, seemingly chaotic and politically risky from the get-go. As Briefs has become an international hit with a strong cult following and many tours to London, Berlin, Edinburgh and New Zealand as well as around Australia, chaos and risk have remained consistently central to their work, which I explore further below.

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68 Parts of this section have been submitted for publication in the forthcoming edition of Performance Matters (May 2018) (Special Edition)

69 Briefs remains a Brisbane based company, however their cast has expanded to include artists from around Australia and also guest artists from the USA.
At the time of Brief’s inception, the Brisbane performing arts sector was somewhat lacking in accessible venues for freelance artists and independent companies to showcase their work. It was a time when the major companies tended to monopolise the “alternative” performing arts spaces, so that smaller and emerging companies were struggling to gain visibility. As for Briefs in its earliest days, rental costs for the key performing arts spaces and the favourite alternative spaces were not at the time within the company’s financial capacity. Thus, Briefs chose very alternative spaces such as bookshops and community halls to house their early performances. In many ways this contributed to the unique uses of space in their performance style (see further below) and also influenced the kinds of audiences they drew. That is, in Brisbane, Briefs “cult” and “underground” following can partly be credited to the very non-traditional spaces they chose in which they choose to showcase their work.

In a range of ways Briefs further intensifies the questions circus asks about bodies, what we expect of them and how we understand them. Circus of all kinds, by definition, promises its audience super-humans performing “impossible” physical feats. There is an expectation of edge of your seat moments: there will be muscles, there will be flight, there will be daring, and you will be impressed by what circus bodies do. Contemporary circus artists could leave it at that and nevertheless draw attention to the possibilities of the human body. However, as noted in other connections, another significant innovation that contemporary circus can bring is to stretch to breaking point preconceived notions of how bodies should behave in relation to the genders assigned to them.

The small group of circus artists who formed Briefs wanted to make a work that explored masculinities. That was the only guidance the founders gave each of their collaborators at the start: bring an act that makes a comment about masculinity. The first show featured conventional circus acts such as plate spinning, hula hoops, hand balancing and acrobatics as well as short films, contemporary dance, and culturally hybrid performance. For example, Natano Fa’anana’s contemporary take on traditional Samoan dance was paired with his short documentary about Polynesian tattoo rituals featuring footage of his own eleven-hour tribal tattoo ritual. All the acts had a particular take on masculinities and all shared a tongue-in-cheek attitude to some extent Briefs have maintained their initial focus, but it has become more and more edgy

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70 Natano Fa’anana belongs to the Samoan community and was granted the honour of a Chief tattoo in his village, a rite of passage for the eldest male in the family. His performance was centred on how this impacted on his perspective on masculinity as a Polynesian artist.
with time. In their current self-description: “Briefs is an all male sharp shootin’ cabaret of burlesque with balls, high-flying circus bandits & savage gender offenders” (briefsfactory.com). Using circus to explore what masculinity can mean in contemporary society, in any given performance their work explores ideas of the macho man, drag, the fluidity of the male form, the quirky, and the queer. Solo acts sit alongside large group acts in a format that sees the chaos of slapstick physical clowning sit comfortably alongside dynamic and graceful aerial performance. This could seem like a difficult mix for any ensemble to deliver, however their distinctive format, including their use of chaos and audience interaction, enable the artists to work with multiple concepts within a one-hour show. The Briefs performers utilise chaos to create multiplicities for themselves as artists and are able to do so in ways that enable their audiences to follow their chaos without feeling the need for a common or straightforward narrative. The chaos and risk are actually presented as consistencies – they are what bind the show into a meaningful whole. The artists personify chaos in ways that enable their embodied performances to take multiple forms and trajectories: each artist often portrays various personae, or perhaps more accurately, performs various apparent versions of themselves within the work. This is most evident in the performances by Mark Winmill and Fez Fa’anana (see further below).

A Briefs show is delivered in the style of a speakeasy cabaret, the spatiality and atmosphere of which allow political agendas to flow alongside lighter moments that celebrate pop-culture icons such as Grace Jones. In a similar manner to GOM, the Briefs artists develop spatial relations and a collective spatiality that enable them to take mutual risks. For Briefs, the risks are not only physical, but often highly political. Queer performances, drag inspired characters, critiques on contemporary masculinity and – in a nod to Circus Oz’s early days – political satire and blatant political comment/protest are all presented as an intersecting series of threads throughout their work to date.

Provocations regarding masculine and feminine gender norms are at the forefront. The cast perform both in and out of drag throughout and the blurring of traditional expectations of gender performance is apparent in the costuming as well as the stylisation and choreography of the work. Choreography ranges from parodies of overtly masculine movements to more transverse representations of gendered bodies. Recent reviews have described Brief’s work as “Aussie Cirque du Soleil meets Ru Paul’s Drag Race”.
Performer and creative director Fez Fa’anana explains that “Briefs likes to toy with notions of identity, masculinity and politics in a glittery way”. He continues,

We do a lot of group acts as well. I guess it takes that kind of old school circus format and messes it up. All of the acts we try to present in a unique way, something that goes beyond the traditional or expected form. It’s all about trying to flip things on their head a bit. This is not a gay show, it’s not a straight show: it is a show that celebrates life, celebrates the idiot, and celebrates the freak. It’s a little bit of fun and a whole bunch of silly. (*Briefs the Second Coming* YouTube interview for Sydney Festival 2013)

A *Briefs* show could be seen as a bit of a chaotic creative jumble. There is no discernible through-narrative; the work sits in a slapped together cabaret “order” which allows it to keep the chaos present but under control and also allows for the show to shift according to its audience reaction. As Natano Fa’anana puts it, “we like to say that *Briefs* is held together with a little bit of gaffer tape and hope”. However, in my professional analysis much of the appeal of *Briefs* lies in the brashness of its apparent chaos and the fact that, despite the refined production and the high technical values of the work, the sense of chaos is centred. The dominant sense of not-too-polished entertainment keeps the show accessible and connected to its audience. The perpetual sense of chaos allows a multiplicity of performance experiences to operate within one show, for the artists and their audiences, thus inviting audience members to “come along for the ride”, so to speak.

Earlier I introduced the idea of chaos as key to creativity in circus, and *Briefs* is in many ways creative chaos personified. It provides a performance that is extremely well rehearsed, but still holds an element of unpredictability and spontaneity. The sense of chaos is utilised to break down barriers between audience and artists. Their second touring work, “Briefs: the second coming” is a tightly polished show that nevertheless maintains the rough edges from its original format. Thus their work continues to appeal to a diverse audience demographic. The tropes of circus are present in *Briefs* through the apparatus and the group acrobatics that audiences have come to recognise and expect: trapeze, juggling, hula hoops and so on. However, it is the use of other performance mediums such as drag and what the ensemble describes as bent-burlesque alongside the highly skilled acrobatics, that provide a particularly enticing and thought-provoking version of what circus has to offer a contemporary audience.

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71 In my interview with Natano Fa’anana 2015 he described the format of the work as bent-burlesque, referring to how the artists have chosen their own concept of burlesque merged with contemporary circus and comedy.
As discussed earlier in relation to “the girl in the red dress”, contemporary circus has seen several leading companies presenting work that appears to reinforce traditional gender roles. Such work reverts to a conventional staging of circus bodies where women are delicate and graceful, and men are strong and dynamic. Presented in this way, recent circus can erase strides that the artform has previously made in shifting perceptions of what bodies are capable of according to gender. Briefs are challenging that reversal in every respect.

Butler argues that, “as much as drag creates a unified picture of ‘woman’ (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity though the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence” (Butler, 1990, p.137). She explains further:

Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity. (1990, pp.137-138)

What is refreshing about Briefs is their ability to subvert and challenge their own masculinity without setting up a binary of oppositional gender roles. The performance of drag in this instance uses displays or tropes of femininity as weapons of social power and diversity rather than the kind of traditional drag performance that can border on a parody or caricature of an overly sexualised concept of female. Briefs brings traits of female and male alongside each other. An example of this is the closing act of “Briefs: The Second Coming”, where the entire cast of very muscular men sport various styles of the traditionally female sequined leotard. Some of the artists are in full drag make-up the others are not. Juxtaposed to the sequins, displayed through the lycra, the male body is openly celebrated, not hidden or disguised as female.

Peta Tait observes that, “the circus spectacle is bodies in motion” (1999, p.130) and that “circus physicality is inseparable from social ideas” (1999, p.129). Briefs demonstrates these observations in the use of the body as a means of social expression, a political voice and a way to provoke thought through the physical aesthetic of their work. The content of the shows can move quickly. For example, in “Briefs: the Second Coming”, acrobat Mark Winmill screams out, mid trick, his expletive-loaded thoughts on former conservative Australian Prime Minster, Tony
Abbott. For *Briefs*, the gender-blurring contemporary circus body becomes a vehicle for socio-political comment.

Such verbal political statements are interspersed throughout the show but the costumes and props have just as much political signification. The sequin leotards in the final group piece comprise the current national and the Aboriginal flags. The presence of the Aboriginal flag alongside the coloniser’s flag is a gesture in the ongoing struggle in contemporary Australian society for reconciliation through adequate recognition of Indigenous Australians. Although this costuming features only at the end of the show, it is this visual that is used on all promotional material. It is part of the “*Briefs* image” – shamelessly diverse in its representations of “Australianess” and blatantly political.

*Briefs* is unapologetic in its artistic process and how it presents itself. Nothing is watered down or “tamed”, and yet the company has developed a diverse audience. It has enjoyed continuous success on both the national and international stage with five-star reviews and sold out seasons. The company has been recognised with several notable arts awards and continues to push the boundaries of circus, theatre and burlesque. The cast members have mastered the fine balance of appealing to a general audience while staunchly maintaining their social and political agenda. This choice is replete with creative risk, given that more often than not, creative work that overtly relies on political agendas can polarise audiences. *Briefs*, however, has maintained its artistic authenticity despite such deliberately political work. Their incredibly diverse audience has grown from a cult following of circus artists and queer theatre-goers to encompass as well middle-aged heterosexual couples and various others you might expect to be more traditional theatre goers. *Briefs* attract adults of all ages and most ethnic backgrounds.

As mentioned above, founding artist, Mark Winmill, uses his body and his skills to express his political stance, for example on the treatment of refugees and the question of marriage equality. As he holds his audience through a perfect hula hoop four split at high pace, or as he is basing an acrobatic sequence, randomly, unexpectedly, Mark shouts out his views. It is an interesting artistic choice for Winmill, given that more often than not, circus artists do not speak on stage – and Winmill not only chooses to speak, but to shout. There is no knowing when this might occur in any performance. Aesthetically and in its artistic values, the work of Briefs is anything but subtle. Their performances bring to mind Judith Butler’s observation that: “One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body and, indeed, one does one’s body
differently from one's contemporaries" (1988, p.521). Winmill “does” his body – or performs his identity, sexuality and gender – in diverse other ways throughout a Briefs show. A trapeze artist and acrobat who was also crowned “2012 King of Burlesque” by the Burlesque Hall of Fame in Los Vegas, his aerial performance displays his physical strength and muscle definition, showcasing his “masculinity” while at the same time emphasising traits that are usually associated with being feminine. He takes preconceived ideas of gender and repackages them so that the audience is presented with a mix of beauty, strength and brattish humour. His aerial birdbath trapeze act effectively demonstrates the concept of gender fluidity, while teasingly drenching the front row in water. This act sees Winmill present his dynamic and fast-paced static trapeze skills in such a way that although we can see the broadness of his shoulders, the definition of his muscles as he works through his act, we are also taken by his fluidity of movement, his graceful extension of the lines of his body, his perfectly pointed toes. Winmill's trapeze act defies a binary of gendered bodies; instead it combines the expected traits of graceful beauty (traditionally female) alongside strength and control (traditionally male) in such a way that it has become his signature style of aerial performance.
Figure 9: Mark Winmill performs his aerial birdbath trapeze act

Image provided by and reproduced with the permission of Hamish McCormick, Carnival Cinema
Figure 10: Mark Winmill’s aerial birdbath

Image provided by and reproduced with the permission of Hamish McCormick, Carnival Cinema
Later in the show, he also performs as an alter-ego drag character “Nadia Comminatcha” – a failed Olympic gymnast\(^{72}\). Nadiah is rude, aggressive and loud, sporting a fabulous lime green sequin bikini and frenetically manipulating hula hoops while teetering on stripper heels. Winmill’s performance of Nadiah is vastly different in its depiction of the body and gender tropes to the aerial birdbath. Nadiah is anything but ladylike, despite the “feminine attire”. Butler explains how gender can become unstuck:

> When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (1990, p.6)

There is no question that this aptly describes the affective terrains of gender traversed in any Briefs show and there is equally no question that the ensemble members are aware of the extent to which their work is at once entertaining, challenging and theorising.

Winmill’s performance of gender is whatever it needs to be at any given time throughout the show. He is not dis-embodied from his “manliness” in any way, switching it on and off or merging it with the “femme” or “queer”. Senelick stresses in relation to theatre that “[p]erforming another gender does not define one’s ‘true’ gender, either by confirmation or contrast” (1992, p.xii).

Although there is no through narrative in Briefs, and the characters keep shifting, there is a connecting persona in the form of the MC, Fez Fa’anana in drag as his character “Shivannah”. During the show Fa’anana describes his character to the audience as “The love child of the bearded lady and the ring master”. Shivannah ties the show together but not in a smoothly polished, “hosting” way. She is brash, shamelessly clumsy and invites, or perhaps incites, audience interaction. She openly refers to scene changes that take place while she is on stage and doesn’t hide any technical mishaps that may occur in the show. This all adds to the warmth of Briefs. It creates an energy that reminds the audience that while the show has developed as a professional production, it continues to embrace rough edges.

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\(^{72}\) Winmill developed this character as a parody of some gymnasts in their later lives and at the same time a nod to Romanian Olympic gymnast Nadia Comenici who was famously awarded a perfect ten score at the 1976 Olympic Games, Montreal, Quebec. (Natano Fa’anana, Interview, July, 2014)
Figure 11: Mark Winmill as Nadiah
Image provided by and reproduced with the permission of Hamish McCormick, Carnival Cinema

Figure 12: Nadiah creates the through line for the audience
Image provided by and reproduced with the permission of Hamish McCormick, Carnival Cinema
Those rough edges, that made the company’s artistic concept stand out from the very start, are central to various techniques that erase the fourth wall, connecting easily and edgily with audiences. In each MC spot or connecting MC moment, costume changes vary and a slick contrast of femme and quirks on masculinity remains. Unlike traditional drag performers, and long before Conchita won Eurovision, Fa’anana keeps his facial hair prominent, combined with ensembles worthy of Beyoncé. A direct nod to fluid gender identity is presented in Shivannah’s “satire magic” act. The costume consists of one side as a gold “magician’s assistant” leotard, the other half a traditional black and white tuxedo. The creative choice of this costuming speaks directly to the split in Shivannah’s identity and performance persona. The blurring of male and female, and satire on the conventional split between masculine and feminine, are unapologetically presented in the one moment. Also acknowledged in Shivannah, of course, is the influence of traditional or classical circus acts and the age of the circus freak – the bearded lady and so on.

As already noted, the creative risk taken in setting up the spatiality of Briefs is fundamental to its success. The energy and flow of a Briefs performance is set before the show even begins. Raffle tickets are sold by the Briefs artists, who rove through the space as audience members are making their way in and taking their seats, which immediately breaks down any illusion of performer-audience barriers. This early interaction sets up an expectation of intimacy between audience and artists. Creating such an intimate shared space is central to how the Briefs artists are able to tread across social terrains of gender binaries and hold issues up to the audience for critique and alternative perception. The raffle is drawn mid show and the prize is part of an act within the show. An audience member is brought on stage to interact when receiving their “raffle prize”. Natano Fa’anana describes it as “bringing the RSL to the big-top” (Interview, May 2014).

To facilitate this flow between performers and audience, the show is always set in a cabaret format regardless of whether it is performed in a Spiegel tent or in a classical theatre. This creates a level of intimacy with the audience that doubtless contributes to the fact that people see the show multiple times. Briefs have a return audience demographic with each tour and sometimes within the same season.
Figure 13: Fez Fa’anana as Shivannah

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Having experienced this “cult following”, founding member Davy Sampford spoke to me about the *Briefs* “fans”:

People come back and bring their friends. People bring their mum or dad or their work friends back to see the show. It’s the same show, they come more than once in a season. It’s because of Fez and how it feels more like a nightclub. It’s more that you are going for a good time, not just to see a show. People feel a part of it instantly. They don’t just feel like they are sitting watching it. We do a lot of crowd stuff, meeting people afterwards. People really kind of like that. They come back “you remember me?” And I often say ‘Yes, I do remember you because you have been here six times!’ (Davy Sampford, Interview, July 2014)

Another layer to the creative chaos at play in *Briefs* is that, regardless of what kind of venue they are in, elements of the performance can happen anywhere in the space, not only on the stage. Aerial acrobat Benjamin Lewis performs aerial straps above one of the tables at which audience members are seated. He hovers over them, swings across the audience and plummets into acrobatic drops dangerously close to them, bringing the audience into his risk taking, providing them with an incredibly close encounter with his acrobatic performance, which further intensifies the intimacy of the performer-audience relationship. Sharing the performance space in this way removes the fourth wall. For *Briefs* the creative choice to share the spatial qualities of the performance with their audiences from the start of the show to the finish is intrinsic to how the various acts in the show are read – putting it bluntly, the intimacy of the show makes it more likely that audience members will respond positively to its ideological and political content. Invited to share in the apparent chaos and extremes of the performance, the *Briefs*’ audience also shares the content. As the artists share the risk-taking potentials of the circus body with brash humour, remarkable skill, and at times great beauty, it is difficult for audience members to resist, or resent, the ways in which they are being invited to share the show’s critique of normative values.

In all types of performance, the venue as space affects the experience of the artist, which in turn shapes the experience of the spectator. Both performers and audiences share their “place” within the *Briefs* performance space. A *Briefs* show provides a space where gender can be explored and represented in ways that ask the audience to think beyond themselves and their experience of the social, including gender identity. The creative risks taken by the *Briefs* collective certainly allow political issues and transgressive performances of gender and sexuality to be packaged with the glitter and astonishing physicality of circus bodies in action. At the same time, however, the production of intimacy through all kinds of spatial strategies is central to whether the
“package” actually reaches people in ways that make them think about the issues at stake.

For *Briefs, GOM, The Happy Sideshow* and “LIMBO”, the ability to indulge in ongoing creative and political risk-taking and the cultivation of chaos as a key element in creative practice are enhanced by the independent nature of the company structures within which the performers operate. An autonomous company structure that is not reliant on government funding obviously allows a broader freedom of expression and more creative risk. However, there is little value in such freedom if performers do not develop strategies that enable them to bring audiences with them and encourage them to engage with what performances offer. After all, it is not feasible to be sustainable as an independent company if you are not also able to develop audiences and keep their interest over time. Here I have canvassed some examples of how this can be achieved. In the next chapter I explore the characteristics that are involved in the emergence of an even greater proportion of independent companies in the Australian contemporary circus sector.
Chapter Six: Towards new ways of working

*Independent companies challenging government funding models*

I have indicated the important role that independent companies and freelance artists have played in Australian contemporary circus. Intrinsic to the constant development and growth of the thriving national scene, the influence of Australian independent companies and individual artists is also evident on a global scale. Here I discuss how the rapid success of independent companies has seen the independent companies form an assemblage of their own, at once connected to and different from the wider Australian sector. I have also suggested that the various kinds of contemporary circus companies, freelance artists, shifting collectives of artists (such as appear, disband and reassemble in sideshow, for example) along with the NICA, circus schools, other company-affiliated training arrangements, and master trainers, can be thought of as together constituting a milieu – as a vibrant, always moving in-between – from which all kinds of circus rhizomes and lines of flight emerge and to which they loop back in many ways. As we have noticed with women’s circus and sideshow, for example, those various lines of flight and rhizomes assemble themselves in various arrangements that are never closed – they always remain open to their previous connections and to forming new connections. In my analysis, what has occurred with Australia’s independent circus companies is that they have become a particularly vital and significant assemblage. Performers, trainers, directors and producers move between different companies in the assemblage, as well as between the independent companies and subsidised elements of the sector.

“For those unfamiliar with Deleuzian terminology”, Coleman and Ringrose (2013) explain, “‘assemblage’ is a key concept that seeks to account for multiplicity and change (or becoming)” (2013, p.5). Too often, the concept is misunderstood as referring to a grouping that can be discerned as enclosed and separate within a larger field, when the characteristics of difference and dynamism, movement and transformation are always already associated with “assemblage” when Deleuze and Guattari deploy the term. Multiplicity and change, rather than separation and stasis in a new form, have created new ways of working in Australian contemporary circus, and this is particularly obvious in the kinds of practices and ideological commitments that characterise our leading independent companies.
As indicated earlier, in the sector the definition of companies or artists as “independent” refers to the fact that they are not receiving ongoing government or corporate funding. This usage does not include small amounts of one off project funding or sponsorship, rather, it refers to large amounts of operational funding from major government bodies such as the Australia Council for the Arts (OzCo) or state arts funding bodies such as Arts Queensland, Arts Victoria and so on. While longstanding, major “flagship” companies such as Flying Fruit Fly Circus, Circus Oz and Circa, have long been supported by government through operational funding, in-kind support such as residency in public venues or capital works funding for purpose-built venues, it has not been easy for smaller companies to access this kind of support. Given that most smaller companies have received at least some project funding and/or international promotional support via Austrade and so on, it would be unfair to suggest that there is any obvious correlation between the edginess of a company’s work and their access to ongoing government support. However, the “arts dollar” has become a smaller and smaller proportion of national and most state budgets, while the Australian contemporary circus sector has seen exceptional growth. Thus, it has been necessary for companies to work towards maximum sustainability and minimum reliance on government funding.

Since the formation of Briefs Factory in 2008, the presence of independent companies on the national and international touring circuits has increased rapidly, with companies such as Briefs, Gravity and Other Myths, Company 2 and Casus consistently touring their work. In doing so, the leading independent Australian companies are successfully carving out a space for themselves alongside long-term industry heavyweights that receive large amounts of government funding, such as Circa. The achievements of these independent companies/collectives that are not heavily funded and are often run with an autonomous operating structure, are all the more impressive when we consider that they are undertaking the same tour circuits as the major supported companies, consistently selling out seasons and receiving 4-5 stars reviews.

In understanding how the independent sector operates in its own sphere but is not removed from the major activity of the Australian contemporary circus industry, it is

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73 This is not only the case for circus, of course. It applies to almost all artforms. The cuts hit hardest in the “smaller” end of the spectrum – governments will not abandon the Australian Ballet, for example, although they will reduce its funding to encourage it to seek greater support from philanthropists and corporate sponsors. The “slice of the pie” that remains for small companies, community arts and so on becomes more and more meagre. It is a familiar story in many parts of the world – government policy pushing the replacement of “subsidized” arts sectors with “sustainable” activity.
helpful to draw on Agamben’s (1993) essay, “Outside”. In Agamben’s terms, the independent circus sector operates “on the threshold”:

It is important here that the notion of ‘outside’ is expressed in many European languages by a word that means ‘at the door’ (fores in Latin is the door of the house, thyrathen in Greek literally means ‘at the threshold’). The outside is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives access to the world – in a word, it is its face, its eidos. (Agamben, 1993, p.68; emphasis in original)

If we think about this in relation to what I have already stressed about the continuing connectedness of a Deleuzian assemblage, it becomes clear that in considering how the independent companies function in relation to the whole sector, the notion of liminality is as useful as the notion of ongoing rhizomics-in/as-becoming. It is interesting, too, in the light of Agamben’s emphasis on the door or threshold as eidos, to recall Frodo Santini’s comment about how the performer is “the one who chooses to face the other way” (see Chapter Five above). To make their work sustainable, to continue to direct their work to audiences in the sense the Frodo meant, Australia’s independent circus companies and artists have chosen to face outwards to the world.

In comparison to the subsidised contemporary circus companies, the independent companies currently contribute equally to the reputation and growth of the artform. Keeping this in mind, it is important to take into account the realities of the lines of flight on which the independent companies operate: their operations are more difficult and fraught with financial risk than those of the major companies. For the most part, each independent company supports its next work or rehearsal process on minimal funds which more often than not come from the earnings of its last tour. This creates a deeper element of risk for the artists who are promoting their tours on minimal marketing budgets in comparison to the funded companies, who, through their recurrent funding and thus ongoing company infrastructures, have entire departments dedicated to marketing their work. Chelsea McGuffin stressed the exigencies and practicalities of creating new work as an independent company when I asked her how Company 2 funds its work:

We don’t! We just do it. Project funding is a rarity. Our show ‘She would walk the sky’ was commissioned by the Brisbane Powerhouse – we didn’t get any government funding. Company 2 just received its first small project grant which was to support the rehearsal period of ‘Sediment’. It came under the ‘to go to production’ fund through Arts Queensland. We haven’t applied for a lot. We have had a bit of support through the Brisbane City Council before, but we usually just make the work and tour it. We make a
living by touring it. It’s a real dilemma. There is no money in Queensland. There really isn’t. There is so much great stuff here, but it can’t live here, it has to go and exist somewhere else. So we make our work to send it out on tour. When you are in that touring mindset, you can’t fit into grant and funding time lines. We aren’t making projects to fit into grant boxes. We need to build it here and now so it can tour at this time, at this festival etc. (Chelsea McGuffin, Interview, October 2014)

McGuffin raises the important point that, due to the existing climate in cultural policy/politics Australia, the majority of Australian contemporary circus companies, whether they are independent or a major funded company, spend a great deal of their time touring their work offshore. Certainly (as discussed in Chapter Two) the major festivals in Australia are becoming more committed to including contemporary circus in their artistic programming, however in order to remain sustainable the majority of Australian contemporary circus companies must spend the bulk of their year working overseas.

As mentioned in Chapter One, contemporary circus in Australia is yet to be considered a major artform. It is for the most part seen as somewhere between dance and theatre, it is yet to appear as its own artform category on funding applications, and it struggles to be programmed in major venues in Australia. Natano Fa’anana discussed the ongoing challenge that *Casus* has faced in gaining programming support from major Queensland venues. While the collective has had ongoing support from smaller venues such as the Judith Wright Centre, unlike their Queensland colleagues *Circa*, they are yet to secure programming in the larger venues such as the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC). Yet *Casus* achieve successful programming in major venues of the same calibre throughout Europe, which makes the unattainable nature of high-end venues in Australia all the more frustrating for independent companies.

We tour overseas a lot because we are not getting the support of what I call the middle tier – the ‘high art’ theatre venues. The smaller and underground venues and festivals, we have got that covered. The middle tier, the leading local theatres, we haven’t. We are still trying to penetrate that area of venues such as QPAC. Unfortunately, we don’t see that as an option. I don’t even consider it at this stage. (Natano Fa’anana, Interview, August 2014)

Although the independent artists often function in a state of continuing financial risk, they do have complete creative control and freedom regarding the kinds of work they create. Their artistic content is entirely their decision, not that of a government-funded artistic director, or a board of directors. With this artistic freedom, companies such as *Briefs Factory* have secured a signature style that is as provocative and political as the
members want it to be. *Briefs*’ eccentricity is a crucial aspect of its appeal, ensuring that it stands out in comparison to touring companies that cultivate a more fluidly choreographed, almost balletic performance style, which is both familiar and successful in international contemporary circus (*Cirque du Soleil* is the leading example of this aesthetic). On the other hand, in cultivating an edgy, ideologically-driven style, *Briefs* has adopted what is potentially a high-risk strategy not only artistically but commercially – this is particularly the case in relation to whether certain established venues will program highly political shows. While *Briefs*’ work could have been less financially viable than a more tamed aesthetic, the company’s choices have proved successful: it has toured consistently and sustainably since 2010.

It does appear to be the case that the provocative content of *Briefs*’ work has minimised the company’s opportunities to access government funding, or at least given company members a strong view that there is little point in pursuing those avenues. Further, such brash political expression and an unrelentingly queer performance style do not come without critical disapprobation – their performances tend to polarise theatre and arts critics. However, *Briefs* has made a virtue of this, habitually utilising any abysmal reviews or political backlash to its advantage, including it in show content and in some instances, branding show merchandise with derogatory quotes from critics. As Natano Fa’anana explains:

> We had some pretty dismal reviews in the early days of touring *Briefs*. A review of our first tour to Adelaide said something like: ‘At best it was a progressive high school musical… only worth 2 stars’. As a collective, we thought, great that’s awesome, let’s share that review on our social media and parody it. And we sold out that season anyway. So the audience is saying something completely different to the high art reviewers! Another review we received in Edinburgh referred to us as ‘Feckless cock prancers’, which we thought was hilarious – so we went and had bags made with that printed on them and sold them at the shows. We made merchandise out of the bad reviews. (Natano Fa’anana, Interview, August 2014)

In appropriating and celebrating such critical responses, the *Briefs* artists subverted the apparently homophobic, or at the very least, elitist, “high arts” value judgements regarding their performances, and concurrently they value-added by transforming negative reactions into additional arts product and/or promotional merchandise. This is a good example of “making multiplicities” as an effective mode of resistant action. What matters from a Deleuzian perspective is that rather than enter into a pointless dispute that could only involve taking up a defensive, oppositional stance and thus further entrench a series of binaries – in relation to sexuality as well as aesthetics – that enables such criticism in the first place, the *Briefs* artists are refusing to play the
game as it is set up by the hierarchised parts of the arts industry. The sustenance of such hierarchies depends on binarised thinking, which persists in the arts in many more ways than we might want to acknowledge. Patricia Wise (2002) argues that:

Further to the grand sign ‘culture’ and subsumed under it, playing themselves through in policy formation, and informing public responses to policy change, there remain several tired but still operative binaries: ‘heritage/gallery’ and ‘popular/corporatised’ arts; ‘subsidised sector’ and ‘sustainability’; ‘flagship’ and ‘experimental’ arts; ‘major companies’ and ‘community arts’; ‘mainstream’ and ‘minority’; ‘emerging’ and ‘established’ artists … and so on. (Wise, 2002, p.223)

I notice that I have drawn on a number of these binaries, or variations on them, in the course of this dissertation, which itself provides an insight into the extent to which they continue to be “operative” in cultural sector discourses. If anything, some of them have become more entrenched as the language of “creative industries” has proliferated in policy, but more importantly, as cuts to arts funding have been justified relative to which individuals and organisations receive funding (or don’t). Further, both of the foregoing examples of the kind of critical language used to de-value Briefs, are underpinned by the ongoing deployment of this binarised, hierarchised paradigm. Wise continues:

Each of these is a pairing of competing discourses and interests...and each doubling establishes itself through a specific and simple opposition, constituting a dualism. For example, both of the terms in the binary ‘high arts/popular culture’ have a starting point in a particular approach to aesthetics which made the distinction between them possible in Western culture. Contrasts between them as complex cultural fields are therefore driven and contained by that aesthetic distinction. And if the starting point in aesthetics is collapsed, interpretation of different practices in different fields devolves to a concern about ‘quality’, or unseemly public debates about post-modern theorists flattening the cultural landscape, or another dualism about what needs/deserves state funding and what does not. (p.223)

These binaries, dualisms and hierarchies, so familiar in the arts scenes of most Western countries, are part of what Deleuze and Guattari call “striated space” – in this case, the highly organised space of the state and its discourses, and/or the deeply entrenched discourses of criticism and review. They are also present in gendered and sexualised binaries and dualisms used to perpetuate both homophobic and misogynistic assumptions, attitudes and behaviours. All such binarised, dualistic thinking is intimately connected to dominant discourses and how they are deployed in power-relations. When they appropriate, play with and, indeed, creatively repurpose such discourses, Briefs rupture striated space with a view to operating in the smooth space that is more often associated with creative life. Striated space is marked by its
interest in power and status; makes a virtue of closed borders, strict organisational strategies and structural arrangements that facilitate top-down control; and at its most effective, operates as a socio-cultural machine that ticks over without disruption in the interests of the perpetuation of that machine. Smooth space shows no such signs of command and control. It is open in every direction and dimension, inviting fluid movements in it and through it, flexible relations and collaborative engagements. However, we must be wary of not introducing another binary, and dualistic model, in critiquing binaries and dualisms. Deleuze and Guattari are never concerned with the “unity” that might be imagined to exist at either end, so to speak, of a spectrum of power relations or socio-cultural potentials. For them, as I have stressed throughout, it is always movement, change, becoming, and therefore the in-between that matters. Thus they write:

Smooth and striated space – nomad space and sedentary space … are not of the same nature. No sooner do we note a simple opposition between the two kinds of space that we must indicate a much more complex difference by virtue of which the successive terms of the oppositions fail to coincide entirely. And no sooner have we done that than we much remind ourselves that the two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.474)

Artists of all kinds are frequently assumed to share a desire to “break out of the mould” in order to “be original” and also in order to comment on the normative practices of their society. In The Rise of the Creative Class, Richard Florida (2002) suggests that it is

[s]mall wonder that the creative ethos marks a strong departure from the conformist ethos of the past. Creative work in fact is often downright subversive, since it disrupts existing patterns of thought and life. It can feel subversive and unsettling even to the creator. (2002, p.31)

Given the book’s concern precisely with positing the part a “creative class” can play in policy and planning for urban and regional development, that is, in producing striated arrangements that aim to increase the economic life of cities and regions, there is something a little jarring about this invocation of the apparently “smooth” qualities associated with the arts and artists, and with all kinds of creative activities. However, this is also an instance of what Deleuze and Guattari stress about how the two spaces are always interacting and interimplicated. It remains the case that the desire to be different and disruptive is certainly a quality that is widely perceived to characterise artists, and which, therefore, is frequently part of the self-construction of creative
people. What confronts contemporary circus artists is a matter of degree, of where they position themselves on the ever-moving, ever-changing flow between smooth and striated.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987, passim) also write about these movements-between in terms of “molecular” and “molar” assemblages, in terms of political structures between the extremes of anarchy (smooth) and fascism (striated – whether of the left of the right). In relation to the arts, they position the most disruptive artists, such as Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, with the molecular, albeit briefly, as the revolutionary aspects of their work blow apart ever-tighter, molarised arrangements, rupturing boundaries and emerging as a new line of flight – momentarily molecularising, or entering completely smooth space. But the molecular will always begin to reassemble itself just as the smooth will always be once again striated. These are all movements of de- and reterritorialisation, of course, at the same time as making multiplicities and impelling becomings.

As is the case in most artforms, contemporary circus artists face a choice between a more mainstream performance path that can even sometimes provide full-time work conditions with holiday pay and superannuation, or take the more subversive, challenging and insecure road of being an independent artist or collective. The benefit of the latter is the freedom of creative expression that a collective like Briefs Factory offers its artists. It clearly matters to each of them that the independent collective enables them to contribute a voice for social, cultural and political freedom that can openly challenge the current conservative political climate in Australia. The more successful Briefs has become, nationally and internationally, the more significant their ideologically informed creative expression has become. As with GOM, their audiences are much more diverse than might be presumed, and the reach of their voices is thus extensive. The idiosyncratic, edgy qualities of their aesthetic combined with exceptional levels of skill in performance as well as in how their work is shaped, broadens their appeal.
Recently, Marriage Equality for same sex and transgender couples has finally been achieved by legislative change in the Federal Parliament, following very strong support in a non-binding postal survey which, the federal government stressed, was “not a vote”. A key feature of the “No” campaign was instilling fear concerning freedom to express gender fluidity and concerning non-heteronormative representations of gender in education and the media. In response to this campaign, marked as it was by outrageous misrepresentations about “threats” to children, Briefs Factory built a peaceful protest into their 2017 London Wonderground season, which streamed live on social media. Consistently, the political expression and cultural subversion involved in performances of gender from artists such as the Briefs Factory collective, enable Australian contemporary circus to make a strong statement in celebration of diversity and acceptance of difference in contemporary society.

A rise in the proportion of independent companies is not unique to Australia: a global shift has occurred that has seen polar opposites of the global contemporary circus sector concurrently leading the field. In the international cultural landscape of contemporary circus performance larger companies create lavish productions on high budgets, utilising grandiose spectacle in their work, while alongside this, the smaller
independent companies such as GOM and Casus offer a sparer and more intimate aesthetic and performance style. This global trend was evident to Mr Lu when we discussed the future of contemporary circus:

We have another change happening right now. It is globalization and capital driven. So now you have producers like Franco Dragone (House of the Dancing Waters, Macau) and companies like Cirque du Soleil, multimillion-dollar companies putting on large scale shows for the pure purpose of entertainment which makes a large financial return. In my opinion in the future, it will be either a big company or a small independent company: the medium sized companies are dying out. The next wave of the industry appears to be either large-scale work such as Cirque du Soleil or Franco Dragone, with large casts and big spectacle, or the small companies with six or seven people with a more intimate setting. NICA students are forming smaller companies; Circa are using small ensembles to generate multiple shows. In Montreal, 7 Fingers and Cirque Eloize74 for example are very successful. They are cost effective and they respond to the market quickly. Therefore it will eventually kill the medium sized companies’ place in the sector unless the medium sized companies evolve and respond to the times. (Guang Rong Lu, Interview, November 2015)

Independent companies have been a part of Australian contemporary circus since the mid 1980s, when (as discussed in Chapter Two) Rock n Roll Circus formed out of a Street Arts Community Theatre community project. What we are seeing now, though, is the independent sector achieving equal representation with, and similar global appeal to the small to medium major companies that receive ongoing funding (Circa, Circus Oz, Legs on the Wall etc.). To understand how this has come about, it is important to reflect on the work of companies such as Rock n Roll Circus and stalwarts of the minimalist artistic life, Acrobat.

Rock n Roll Circus/Circa

Rock n Roll Circus (now Circa as discussed earlier) began as an independent company with no reliable, ongoing operational funding from government. It did, however, receive small amounts of project funding throughout its development in order to create small works for marginalised communities such as youth at risk etc. Rock n Roll Circus shifted in size and structure from year to year with performers coming and going but also maintained a core group consisting of artists such as Derek Ives, who was there from the company’s formation through to the appointment of Yaron Lifshitz

74 Although small in company size and structure, Cirque Eloize are in fact part owned by Cirque du Soleil, therefore do not really fit the definition of an independent company. They do, however, produce smaller scale work with a more intimate aesthetic than that of their operating owner, Cirque du Soleil, which is a global corporation with over 4000 employees, a multi-million dollar headquarters, and touring several Cirque du Soleil shows in different countries concurrently.
as artistic director in late 1999. Freelance director, Gail Kelly, created a work with the collective a short time before that significant structural change to a permanent artistic director was to occur. During her interview with me she described the creative processes that Rock n Roll Circus were utilising at that time, when the collective were once again in a phase of shifting in their artistic ideology and creative process. According to Kelly:

They were looking at who they were and why etc. They had done a lot of meaty artistic work, a lot of different projects. They kept changing the company over the years – new people came in, others left and so on. I had known Derek Ives, and he thought that I would be a good director to bring in. They wanted to do a show called 'The Dark'. I told them that I was interested but asked them 'What does that mean? Is it a kids show or a serious show?' 'The Dark' explored concepts of horror and schlock as well as looking into the deep subconscious of the human and the dark side of our inner thoughts and feelings. For a director, the process with Rock n Roll at that point was divine. You would probably never get that kind of process again. We took a year to make 'The Dark', we had many creative development sessions and my way of working is to really work with the performers and find out what they want to do, what they can and can’t do. What's the creation here? What is your challenge as an artist? (Gail Kelly, Interview, November 2015)

Operating with an autonomous collective structure allowed the company the freedom to explore a multitude of artistic styles and methods for creating their work. However, as is often the case with independent companies, the level of burnout for the artists was high and so they eventually sought a full-time artistic director. Changing course completely, they went on to form a not-for-profit structure with a formal board and in turn made the appointment of Yaron Liftshitz. Bringing his expertise in theatre to the company, Liftshitz went on to eventually completely re-brand the artistic ideology of the company towards a more minimalistic aesthetic with a choreographic style of physical language. In the early stages of Liftshitz’s artistic direction the work continued to maintain an essence of the company’s former artistic signature, however that shifted rapidly towards a new aesthetic that differed vastly from the Rock n Roll Circus original. As discussed in Chapter One, in many ways Liftshitz’s artistic direction, his re-organisation of the artistic ideology, can be seen to have re-territorialised Rock n Roll Circus to become what is now known as Circa. Deleuze and Guattari explain that, “Territorializing marks simultaneously develop into motifs and counterpoints and reorganize functions and regroup forces. By virtue of this, the territory already unleashes something that will surpass it” (1987, p.322; emphasis in original). From this perspective, we could acknowledge that Rock n Roll Circus always already carried something that was to become larger and wider-reaching than their original company
structure; in employing an ongoing artistic director, *Rock n Roll Circus*, opened itself out to a new becoming.

From its inception, the work that was developed by Yaron and the *Circa* artists was incredibly innovative for its time. At that stage in the artform's history (1999 through the first half of the 2000s) there were no other companies in Australia creating this kind of contemporary circus aesthetic. Not unexpectedly, the artistic risk taken by *Circa* did not come without criticism, as noted in Davy Sampford's reflections (see Chapter One) and as Chelsea McGuffin elaborates:

> I think we definitely made some work at *Circa* that was well ahead of its time and we made some really bad work too. So it took a while to find the right artistic language. And it took a while for people to find, you know a way that they could relate to that, to digest it as an audience. We had really mixed reactions to the work for some time. I think that we don't necessarily have the mass, particularly in Queensland; we don't have a culture of people who go to the theatre just because they want to go to the theatre to see something and take a risk and try something different. They want to know, am I going to have good seat? How much is the ticket? Is it going to be worth it? (Chelsea McGuffin, Interview, October 2014)

As discussed earlier, *Circa*’s choice to commit to a risky artistic ideology that was not immediately well received, paid off in the long term, with the new artistic language developed at *Circa* going on to become influential across the artform globally, initiating a wave of minimalistic choreographic circus companies emulating the style. It could be said that with Yaron Liftshitz's contribution, *Circa* can be recognised as the creators of a new sub-genre of contemporary circus. However, with the style becoming popular and in turn being emulated repeatedly across the global, has this formerly unique aesthetic become the expected, normalised? *Circa* has gone on to grow in reputation as a leader within the contemporary circus sector internationally and to grow in size. The company has increased in capacity from one small touring ensemble to three touring ensembles and they currently include sixteen shows in their repertoire (*Circa* website). Such growth contributes to increasing the employment opportunities for contemporary circus artists, not only within Australia but also from overseas, with *Circa* now extending their artist call outs internationally. With such rapid growth often comes criticism, and in particular there is a perception that *Circa* is over-extending and is no longer at the cutting edge of the artform, due to so many others replicating their style and due to the sheer volume of work they are producing. Beyond their touring shows *Circa* run a training centre where classes are held for adults and children. They are
also managing arTour\textsuperscript{75} and were appointed the Creative Lead team for the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games arts and culture program, "Festival 2018". With so many projects operating at once, it is important to consider where it is feasible for a company to maintain artistic innovation when they are committed to many projects and are seen to be spread so far and wide. In recent years Circa have often been perceived to cast a large shadow across the Australian sector. Their ever-growing presence can be seen as becoming something approaching a monopoly in Australian contemporary circus, much like the global presence of corporate giants Cirque du Soleil. Their continuing successful output also places Circa in a position to dominate state and federal arts funding pools, which represents heavy competition for emerging and independent companies who are often applying in the same funding rounds and categories.

Presently there are very little, if any remnants of Rock n Roll Circus recognisable in Circa. The rapid growth of the company has rendered its radical foundations all but invisible to those who are not aware of its past. Sadly, due to the independence of the company and its existence prior to the bulk of the digital era, there is little presence of Rock n Roll Circus online. Its influence nevertheless continues to be felt across Australian contemporary circus with artists such as Derek Ives, Antonella Casella, Rudi Mineur and Anna Yen branching out to collaborate and create work that enables their influence to spread rhizomically across the sector, while at the same time, looping back from time to time to the milieu in which Rock n Roll Circus formed, and from which it emerged. Casella notes that she sees the influence of Rock n Roll Circus in the work of Briefs Factory:

\begin{quote}
I wasn't around for the evolution of Briefs, but when I first saw it, I saw Rock n Roll Circus in there. I saw the accessibility, the celebration of diversity, the strong desire to celebrate difference. I felt you could really see the origins of circus in Brisbane in that show. (Antonella Casella, Interview, June 2016).
\end{quote}

Although the rapid success of Circa saw an end of the era of a highly revered independent company, it could be argued that Rock n Roll Circus with its darker, edgier and less polished aesthetic would not have been able to achieve the mass appeal and global success that Circa has gone on to secure. That is not to say that the independent version of the company would not have remained relevant and successful in Australia. However, they would have struggled to become in any way comparable to Circa.

\textsuperscript{75} arTour is a government funded organisation that supports Queensland performing artists and producers to tour their work state-wide and nationally. It acts as a broker to develop relationships between producers and presenters. (www.artour.com.au)
without a willingness to adopt a business model that is more commercially viable. That is, the road to large-scale government support and commercial success of the kind that *Circa* has achieved is paved with striations. If *Rock n Roll Circus* had chosen to continue in its original format, it would perhaps have followed a similar trajectory to the smoother, nomadic and consistently maverick independent company, *Acrobat.*

Figure 15: Derek Ives, *Rock n Roll Circus*

Image provided by and reproduced with the permission of Hamish McCormick, Carnival Cinema
Acrobat

Formed in the mid 1990s, Acrobat is a small independent company consisting of a core duo of Jo Lancaster and Simon Yates. Their artistic process at times sees them include other artists in their creation such as Mozes (a renowned aerial artist) and their most frequent collaborator, Tim Barass, who has worked with them over a long period as the company's musician and sound artist. Acrobat tours its work independently with the assistance of professional producer Margarite Pepper (who also produced Legs on the Wall in its earlier years). In Chapter Four I discussed the performance of Jo Lancaster in Acrobat's show, “Smaller, Poorer, Cheaper” in the context of feminist theatre. Here I explore how the artistic ethos and independent company format of Acrobat has allowed it to create such performances, that are consistently provocative and political in their artistic content and narrative. In a Keynote Address for the 2006 ACAPTA conference, Jane Mullet discusses the poster image for “Smaller, Poorer, Cheaper”, noting its simplicity:

In a 2006 poster of the Australian group Acrobat, the image is of one of the members half way through a summersault in a private house. It is a picture of the acrobat at ‘home’. The show was extraordinarily personal and powerful and the material came straight out of the performers’ lives. (Mullet, 2006)

She goes on to describe the raw and honest aesthetic that Acrobat have become renowned for:

“Smaller, Poorer, Cheaper” is a howl of anguish for our times. It is Brechtian in the way it lays bare the devices of the acrobatic troupe’s performance, peeling back the layers of circus/theatre artifice until there is only the body, not even the costume. This is poor theatre at its most direct. (Mullet, 2006)

While on tour with Flipside Circus’s show "Xtreme Popera", I was privileged to see “Smaller, Poorer, Cheaper” during the Adelaide Fringe Festival, as part of the 2008 program at the Garden of Unearthly Delights. In fact, I saw the show more than once during that season, four times in fact. It was an utterly stunning piece of simple, honest, raw and intimate contemporary physical performance. In addition to various terrains of feminism explored by Jo Lancaster, “Smaller, Poorer, Cheaper” also offered audiences a window into the personal worlds and psyche of the male artists Mozes and Simon
Yates. Yates uses the slack-rope\textsuperscript{76} as his apparatus to tell the story of his experience with depression, which occurred after a serious injury, rupturing his Achilles tendon, left him completely incapacitated and unable to train or perform for a long period of time. His solo performance on the slack-rope began with him dressed in pyjamas deep in sleep, and as the performance unfolded Yates used the unpredictability and precarious nature of the slack-rope's movement to demonstrate his daily struggle to complete basic tasks under the cloud of depression. At one point in the performance he balanced, or more accurately, he swayed on one leg while trying to pour milk and cornflakes into a cereal bowl. In this performance moment, Yates demonstrates that the simple task of breakfast can take immense effort and focus, and seem near impossible to achieve, a pertinent metaphor for the emotional weight that depression can carry for many individuals in their daily lives. Mozes's performance on the corde lysse (aerial rope) presented a more confronting and what could be perceived to be a more grotesque aesthetic. The rope was drenched in thick red dye that dripped and splattered all over him and the audience as he floated his way through an exquisite aerial performance that shared a small insight into his relationship with illness and blood. He began the act costumed in white pants climbing the rope with his hands and feet, squeezing the liquid out of the rope with each climbing movement. He ended in a dramatic aerial acrobatic drop that saw his body stop just shy of the ground, where he paused, floating, out of breath, covered in red, only to drop and land limp on the floor.

\textit{Acrobat} is highly respected in the Australian contemporary circus sector for its astonishing skill and equally impressive performance quality. Their work has long been recognised as exemplary of the very edge of contemporary circus practice. It is incredibly difficult to find another company in Australia that is so deeply committed to its artistic integrity to the extent that it has become the members' whole lifestyle and life purpose. I first encountered \textit{Acrobat} in 2001 while I was undergoing intensive aerial training with Rodleigh Stevens\textsuperscript{77} at \textit{Trix Circus}. At the time I was an emerging circus artist, learning the basics of aerial performance and dedicating my time to becoming a professional aerialist. \textit{Acrobat} was undertaking an intensive training residency with \textit{Trix Circus}, including Jo and Mozes having master classes in swinging trapeze with Rodleigh. I would arrive on site at 7:30am to warm up for my individual trapeze class.

\textsuperscript{76} Slack-rope is an equilibrium apparatus, similar in structure and skill to the tightwire. It consists of a rope, rigged in a draping fashion from one point to the other. As the title suggests, the rope lacks tension and is precarious in its mobility.

\textsuperscript{77} Rodleigh Stevens is a master aerial trainer, who held high-end classes for emerging and professional aerial artists as well as group flying trapeze classes at his home outdoor aerial rig on the Gold Coast. Rodleigh was a highly respected trapeze artist, performing around Europe with his troupe \textit{The Flying Rodelighs} as well as with the famous, and no longer operative, \textit{Ringling Bros Barnum and Bailey}. 
to find Acrobat already well into ensemble skill training, working on teeterboard and partner acrobatics.

Figure 16: Jo Lancaster and Simon Yates, Acrobat
Image provided by and reproduced with the permission of Hamish McCormick, Carnival Cinema

Although I had not seen a wide range of contemporary circus at that time, watching Acrobat’s daily training I immediately recognised the extremely high level of skill and artistic capacity. Now, as an established artist, I appreciate how very privileged I was to gain an insight into Acrobat’s process and to witness the company’s discipline, focus and commitment to the artform. Their signature style has developed from a drive to achieve impeccable skills combined with equally impressive, nuanced narrative engagement and a pared down aesthetic to which audiences respond very strongly. Discussing Acrobat’s work at the 2014 ACAPTA ‘Circus Futures Forum’, Jo Lancaster provided an insight into its practice philosophy and values when she remarked,

Circus is really just an idea and therefore can never really die. Commerce does not rule out what kind of show we produce. Our work is not watered down by the powers that be. We have complete creative control of our work. We display a more brutal aesthetic, a gnawed at the edges aesthetic. (Lancaster, 2014).

Acrobat has predominantly toured its work on the European arts and culture circuit. While it has also featured in Australian festivals such as the Adelaide Fringe Festival
and the Woodford Folk Festival, it has, for most part, remained something of an underground company in Australia, probably because its work often has gritty and confronting content and at times, nudity.

Figure 17: Simon Yates, Acrobat.
Image provided by and reproduced with the permission of Hamish McCormick, Carnival Cinema

It becomes easier to understand how the choice to persist in pushing the boundaries and limitations of the artform sees Acrobat positioned/positioning itself on the brink of the threshold by returning to Agamben’s very short essay, “Outside” (1993). Having explained the relations between “whatever”, “being-such”, the singularity and belonging, and stressed that “Whatever … is the event of an outside” (p.67; emphasis in original), Agamben brings together eventness, experience and affect in the final paragraph:

The threshold is not, in this sense, another thing with respect to the limit; it is, so to speak, the experience of the limit itself, the experience of being-within an outside. This ek-stasis is the gift that singularity gathers from the empty hands of humanity. (p. 68; emphasis in original).

Acrobat’s rawness, or what Lancaster described as a “brutal aesthetic”, combined with their extraordinary skills performed in starkly simple spatial arrangements, draws
audiences into the *event* of “being-within an *outside*”, which greatly intensifies affect. *Acrobat’s* performances can be emotionally and physically powerful for audience members, just as they are for cast members, so that, as explained earlier in relation to Gordo and Ben, the performers, audience and performance enter relations that can be understood in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) “plane of immanence”. At the same time, the intensity of *Acrobat’s* performances and of audience experience of its performances, places the ensemble on the edge of the artform itself. They exist *within* an *outside*, and choose to occupy that place in relation to the sector. This makes their work less visible to the contemporary circus-attending public than that of major companies or other small but well-known companies. Nonetheless, within the international contemporary circus sector *Acrobat* is revered. Due to the decades that the ensemble has spent touring in Europe, their work is more known outside of Australia, but for industry insiders and a solid cult following, they are part of an outside-in-Australia. As such they make a very important contribution to the extent to which the sector imagines and explores the potential to push at the edges; to engage in liminal performances that take the substantial risk of taking up a position on the threshold or even in exteriority.

**Strut n Fret Production House**

Operating on what might be thought of as a different line of flight within the assemblage of independent companies, *Strut n Fret Production House* formed in 1997. They began producing small national tours of collectives such as *The Happy Sideshow* (See Chapter Five) and have since experienced extensive growth, touring numerous works created by the company itself and by independent artists around Australia. Although now a major company, they have remained independent, operating on a sustainable model without government funding, and achieving global success. Founded in Brisbane by Scott Maidment and Sarah Stewart, *Strut n Fret* eventually took up residence in an old substation that was converted into a loft office, from which they operated for several years before relocating to Melbourne in 2009. I discussed in Chapter Two, the company’s creation and curation of *The Garden of Unearthly Delights* as part of the Adelaide Fringe. *The Garden* hosts and programs one hundred performances annually and in 2011 was presented with the Arts Hub Award for Contribution to the Australian Arts Scene. Here I explore the creative works the company has developed and its resulting impact on the Australian contemporary circus sector. *Strut n Fret* have employed a multitude of artists and created pathways for collaboration across artforms. Founder and creative director, Scott Maidment, described in interview the early days of the company:
I’d worked in theatre, mostly doing Shakespeare, but before that I did a unicycling show and then I just decided I wanted to do our own stuff. So we started doing shows in schools. A few things were happening at the same time. We were starting to do some corporate gigs as well. We would have people walking down the sides of walls at corporate functions, creating aerial performance etc. We were doing stuff with Rudi and Mark and Antonella and Allie Wilde – sort of around the time of Rock n Roll Circus and around the same time I met Tiger Lil. Sarah and I saw The Happy Sideshow and so we thought: “well why don’t we manage and produce that?” So we put on a show in the Visy theatre (Brisbane Powerhouse) for two or three weeks and we made enough money to buy all of us tickets to go to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. So we went to Edinburgh and did the show and just started touring internationally with that. Not long after that, we began The Garden of Unearthly Delights. (Scott Maidment, Interview, November 2015)

Soon after the inaugural season of The Garden, Maidment and Stewart began reducing their involvement in the corporate entertainment scene and moved towards creating touring works of their own. Frequently their work is multi-artform inspired, with circus at the centre of the creative process, often accompanied by live music, dance, burlesque, comedy and street art. “Feasting on Flesh” featured esteemed Australian actor Billie Brown, alongside acrobats Tom Flanagan, Mark Winmill, and burlesque artist Gypsy Wood. The show was performed to the live music of now world-renowned Australian musician, Goyte (Wally Debacker). At the time Goyte was an underground musician with some independent radio exposure. However, for the most part he remained relatively unknown, recording his own work in his basement. “Feasting on Flesh” was toured for a shorter period compared to Strut n Fret’s works that would follow it. Nevertheless, it was presented at the Sydney Opera House and toured to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Beginning its life at the Woodford Folk Festival, their hip hop and street culture inspired work, “Tom Tom Crew” toured consecutively nationally and internationally for almost seven years. “Tom Tom Crew” was a hybrid performance of breakdance and circus featuring live graffiti, with hip hop music and percussion setting the soundtrack. In its original casting the multi-artform work featured Australian beat-box icon Thom Thum, percussionist Ben Walsh, DJ Dizz One alongside Flying Fruit Fly Circus graduates Tom Flanagan, Benjamin Lewis, Dan Catlow and Shane Witt. The work exposed hip hop subculture followers to circus and vice versa. Moreover, presented in major theatres around the world, at times it also engaged a mainstream theatre audience with hip hop street culture and high energy circus acrobatics. Strut n Fret have become renowned for this type of cross-pollination of audience demographics: the artistic diversity of their creations often opens up wider audience development for circus and also invites circus audiences to consider the power and potential in hybridized
contemporary performance. Maidment is often referred to in the Australian performing arts sector as a “curator of talents”, an unofficial title for his unusual directorial process. For example, he might start with an individual artist and her/his “quirk” or specific skill and then connect that artist with others who share a similar eccentricity or diversity of style, and build a work with and around those people. I discussed with Maidment how this method of “curating” compares to a more traditional directorial method of casting:

That is kind of it, and that is the process I am using for the current show that I am creating at the moment. I don't really hold castings or auditions. I find people by seeing a lot of stuff – festivals, shows etc. I see an artist or an act that I find intriguing which will inspire ideas for a new work and I build from there. I think one of the things that I have tried to do is to try not just to make a show that I think is an expression of that group of people. More so it's about trying to fit a vibe of a show with an expectation or a demographic of an audience. I'm always thinking about which people are going to come. You know what I mean? Who is the show for? And so it's not just like, ‘oh I want to express this artistic concept about me as a director’ – to me that is not important. But what is important is how to make a connection and showcase people. I remember seeing Circus Oz in their early days and in the show there were people playing in the band and then they'd do some acrobatics and then they do this and that and trapeze, and my reaction was ‘wow these people can do anything’. I want to create that vibe for the audiences that come to our shows. (Scott Maidment, Interview, November 2015)

Using this creative process to curate artists together into new works for certain demographics/audiences, rather than starting with a concept or script and casting artists into already existing roles, Maidment and the Strut n Fret team have successfully created numerous works that have toured on the national and international circuit long term and concurrently. And although of late, Maidment's shows are often made to suit the venue aesthetic and spatiality of festivals and Spiegel tents, they are all vastly different in their conceptual and artistic content. Works such as “Cantina”, “The Dream Menagerie”, “Blanc de Blanc”, “LIMBO” and “Fear and Delight” are all very varied in their representations of contemporary circus performance. Through their successive creation of works that tour for extensive periods, Strut n Fret have created ongoing opportunities for numerous Australian artists. Since their inception, they have provided work for a large cross-section of Australian independent contemporary circus artists. More recently, they have extended those opportunities to overseas artists in order to provide sufficient cast members when multiple versions of the same show are touring concurrently.
One of their most interesting international cross-artform collaborations occurred when Maidment was given the opportunity to work with pop music royalty in the form of Madonna. I asked Maidment how this came about.

We tour our work to London regularly and during a season at the London Wonderground she saw ‘LIMBO’ (2013), but before that she had come along to see ‘Cantina’ the year before (2012). Then in September 2014 I got a phone call from someone saying that Guy Oseary wants to talk to you. And I was like....’I have no idea who that is. Get him to email me.’ Then I found out that he manages U2, Madonna, Lucy Lu, Ashton Kutcher and that he is also the executive producer of the Twilight series. So he called me and then I went out with him a few times and hung out with Madonna in New York. They were interested in having me direct a sequence for her world tour. So we had a few meetings with her team about the show, I pitched a few ideas and they eventually went with a sway pole number. So I went for five weeks and worked on that for the world tour concert and during that time they approached me about doing something for her birthday party. They usually do something big, but since they were working on the world tour they decided to do something more intimate. So they said to me: ‘We think it would be really cool if you made a show for her, for her birthday’. So I brought over some Australian circus artists to perform in an intimate setting for Madonna's birthday. It's still quite surreal really. (Scott Maidment, Interview, November 2015)

As a result of the Madonna world tour, Maidment went on to collaborate with her choreographer, Kevin Stea, who worked with Maidment on the choreography for Strut n Fret's show, “Blanc de Blanc”. This is a show about champagne that features absurdist clowning, aerial artists, burlesque, a Jacuzzi spa and an overtly cheesy MC named Romeo.

Beyond their touring works, Strut n Fret remain dedicated to providing programming opportunities for independent companies and independent artists through their Adelaide festival precinct/venue The Garden of Unearthly Delights. As mentioned earlier, The Garden offers venues for independent artists to showcase their work in a setting that provides wide exposure, which often creates opportunities for cross-artform collaborations. In a number of ways, then, Strut n Fret continue to contribute to fostering the growth of independent companies, feeding back into the assemblage that they emerged from, contributing to new lines of flight within the artform.
Figure 18: “Blanc de Blanc”, Strut n Fret Production House
Image provided by and reproduced with the permission of Hamish McCormick, Carnival Cinema

Figure 19: “The Dream Menagerie”, Strut n Fret Production House
Image provided by and reproduced with the permission of Hamish McCormick, Carnival Cinema
Where to next for independent companies?

It is quite likely, given the current global trends in contemporary circus, that independent companies will continue to accumulate within the Australian sector, with graduates from NICA forming their own small collectives such as Pants Down Circus, One Fell Swoop and The Trash Test Dummies. Further with the Australian Youth Circuses fostering the formation of companies such as GOM, who have rapidly achieved global success, as Mr Lu observed earlier the current rhythm of the Australian contemporary circus sector appears to be produced by the smaller collectives in independent formats operating at their own pace, rather than by a more traditional, government funded mid-scale format. There is no doubt that a preference to maintain autonomy and creative control is partly impelling these rhizomics, but so, too, are cuts to government funding, and other transformations in how the sector operates, or is able to operate. The vitality of the independent sector in Australian contemporary circus in my analysis is due to its range of expressions, intersections and collaborations along with the recognition that survival depends on the capacity to use differences to create differences – that is, to make multiplicities. It also depends on a willingness to take risks, personally, collectively and creatively.

With independence, sustainability and artistic freedom as core values, the leading and/or key independent companies in Australian contemporary circus industry create for themselves a belonging that offers the capacity to produce multiple outcomes; to operate as companies and artists who provide a space where the relevance and authenticity of the artform is regularly challenged.
Chapter Seven: Making Multiplicities

Order and chaos, structure and flow

Circus is a site in which difference proliferates: it makes multiplicities. In many ways the success of contemporary circus rests on its modes of working with multiplicity and with the creative chaos that emerges when individual and collaborative desires and skills meet in the circus space. I have already discussed how chaos and multiplicity are represented in various aspects of Australian contemporary circus. Here I propose that creative chaos is, in fact, embedded within the practices, aesthetics, values and ideological impetus of Australian contemporary circus, and that as such it can be understood as key to why the sector succeeds, and how it maintains and grows its global impact. In varying ways, this is as obvious in the extent of innovative practice in Australian social circus as it is in relation to the major subsidised companies and the cutting-edge, well-known independent companies. I argue that the multiplicity, eccentricity and diversity that characterise the Australian contemporary circus community and its ethos are also central to the success of its creative output. At the same time, I explore how chaos is harnessed productively in all parts of the sector towards welcoming difference, inviting it to feel at home, to multiply and to thrive. I discuss how Australian contemporary circus has come to provide the kinds of rhythms and spaces that facilitate outsiders and misfits in finding belongings without needing to compromise their artistic values or their personal and collective eccentricities and identities. The sector as an assemblage is constantly undergoing processes of de- and reterritorialisation, but within this movement-between, among the becomings and multiplicities, certain aspects of the assemblage persist – including its productive relation to difference and its capacity to make connections within and between fields of difference.

Bonta and Protevi (2004) describe Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “assemblage” as “an intensive network or rhizome displaying ‘consistency’ or emergent effects by tapping into the ability of the self-ordering forces of heterogeneous material to mesh together …” (p.54). It is important to bear in mind, too, that being rhizomic, an assemblage is never a “closed” formation – it will remain open to further connections outside of the “consistency” it has arranged itself into. The questions in relation to

78 Social circus is a term used to describe the work that circus artists and organisations do with at risk communities, using circus as a tool for social change, social intervention and community development. The term was coined by Cirque du Soleil’s social development arm, Cirque du Monde.
circus become, “what makes such heterogenous material (in this case, people) become self-ordering? Why do they come together rhizomically to form an assemblage?” For part of the answer we can look to productive desire such as I discussed earlier – quite simply, the artists really want to be a part of the becoming of the artform, not to fulfil a sense of lack but to enact a desire to produce something exciting. However, there is more to it than this. No matter how much a person may want to become a part of the becoming of contemporary circus, s/he needs to feel welcome, be invited, have a sense that s/he belongs in the context. What creates that feeling is surely the kind of content s/he identifies within the context – that is, “does this look and feel like the kind of space and group of people in which I can feel at home, with which I feel affinity?” When considering such a field of proliferating difference in order to judge that, a person will look for familiar signs. In this sense, circus presents as a “territorial assemblage” (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, p.54). Such an assemblage links bodies (material systems that are themselves assemblages of organs at a lower level of analysis) and signs (triggers of change in those systems) to form ‘territories’ or systems of habit. The territorial assemblage is composed along two axes, content–expression and deterritorialization–reterritorialization. (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, p.54).

Now, in the case of circus, the most obvious “systems of habit” are the training over and over of certain skills until they become habitual for the body, but they also involve aspects of personal embodiment and identity – such as being different, eccentric, idiosyncratic and wanting to push physical and/or creative boundaries – which are just as legitimately “habitual” traits as the capacity to do two back flips from the top of a human pyramid and land on one’s feet. Bonta and Protevi continue:

....territorial assemblages bring together bodies and regimes of signs as content and expression. The content, or that which is put to work, is comprised of ‘machinic assemblages of bodies’ (MAB), that is, arrangements of bodies that provoke and regulate matter–energy flow and hence provide the concrete circumstances of an event or haecceity. The expression, or that which triggers productive change in bodies, is a ‘collective assemblage of enunciation’ (CAE), that is, a social framework of habits and institutions within which order-words effectuate their incorporeal transformations, the shifting of bodies from one region of their state space to another (from one pattern of behaviour to another). (2004, p.54)

So, we have an assemblage in which the content and expression are both necessary to make the event and the circumstances of its eventness. At the same time, we have the “social framework” that leads to “incorporeal transformations”. Here it might be particularly useful to think of that social and institutional setting in two ways – firstly as
the broader social/ideological context of “the state”, its institutions and its dominant discourses – which is often what those who become attracted to circus are on a line of flight away from… Then we have the social/ideological context of “the circus”, towards which and into which these same people are attracted. In effect, the “incorporeal transformation” for such people consists in a choice – whether by design or accidental encounter – to move from the striated “state space” into another, and considerably smoother, spatial context in the form of circus.

For Australian contemporary circus as an artform, the coming together of the machinic assemblage of bodies with the collective assemblage of enunciation produces individual and collective transformations and, I would argue, the capacity for collective creative expression on the part of highly individuated subjects. What attracts those subjects is, of course, the bodies already present and the “matter-energy flow” of contemporary circus as practised by a company or collective or event that any individual joins. Bonta and Protevi refer to the “concrete circumstances of an event” as “haecceity”.

We can think of a haecceity as the environment in which and through which something takes place. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) stress that:

> It should not be thought that a haecceity consists simply of a décor or backdrop that situates subjects, or of appendages that hold things and people to the ground. It is the entire assemblage in its individuated aggregate that is a haecceity; it is this assemblage that is defined by a longitude and a latitude, by speeds and affects, independently of forms and subjects … (1987, p.262)

Earlier I have referred to the signature of the Australian contemporary circus sector, and throughout this dissertation it has become clear that this signature, or collection of characteristics, actions and circumstances, can be identified on several strata, along a number of rhizomes: the use of larrikinism as a mode of identity-as-Australian and as a means to express political and ideological content; the ongoing influence of classical Chinese circus technique present within the great majority of companies; the extreme physicality of performance; the high levels of risk and trust which combined produce an equally high sense of “authenticity” in performance; openness to difference and diversity; and, in the work of Gravity and Other Myths for example, the apparent chaos of bodies collectively testing the limits of physics. I suggest that taken together, these are the most obvious features of “the individuated aggregate” of the haecceity of Australian contemporary circus, as “the entire assemblage”. At the same time, these or a collection of several of these, are also the features of most of the otherwise very
different companies, sideshow acts, social circus collectives and training organisations that constitute contemporary circus in Australia. This haecceity, which welcomes difference and chaos to produce trust and authenticity, can be thought of as both a result of and an ongoing contributor to the milieu that impels the artform's many expressions. In Deleuze and Geophilosophy, Bonta and Protevi (2004) are particularly interested in developing Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas in relation to ecosystems and environments. Given that I often think of and refer to the “ecology” of Australian contemporary circus, their take on “milieu” is helpful in adding a further gloss to how I have used it throughout:

A milieu is the ‘soup’ or the coded medium of particles-flows and the strata that gives birth to or at least supports a rhizomatic assemblage: a living being, a symbiont, or an ecosystem, for example. Milieus are drawn, with rhythms, from chaos; chaos … with its ‘ecstasies’, still subsists as rhythm-chaos, the ‘chaosmos’, between milieus that themselves shift and change. (2004, p.113)

These relations between rhythms and chaos, this chaosmos, is what concerns me here. In this final chapter I want to bring together some of the ideas I have drawn on throughout towards something of a conceptual map (in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense) of the movements involved in Australian contemporary circus.

Chaos, circus and identity

Contrary to the old disparaging usage – “this place is a circus” – the kind of chaos to which I am referring is far from out of control or devoid of order. In Chaos, Territory and Art Elizabeth Grosz (2008) provides an apt description: “Chaos here may be understood not as absolute disorder but rather as a plethora of orders, forms, wills – forces that cannot be distinguished or differentiated from each other, both matter and its conditions for being otherwise, both the actual and the virtual indistinguishably” (2008, p.4) In this sense chaos as deliberately entered into provides the conditions for shifting the order, repackaging it, rearranging it, reterritorialising it to provide a new perspective, to open up new worlds, new ways of being and becoming, new lines of flight and new possibilities. By disrupting order, rather than pretending to have erased or overcome it, circus shows us that chaos can be harnessed to enable control while allowing fluidity, flow and creativity. I discussed with Frodo Santini the role of chaos in the creative processes of making contemporary circus. He suggested that chaos is a necessity within creative process; that it marries with the eccentricity of circus artists to be channelled into productivity and innovation in the artform:
I remember having some sort of epiphany when I was working at Circus Oz. I was sitting back watching us all rehearse and work as an ensemble. And I was thinking that people here are so kooky, in their needs and their ways of behaving and the way they talk – everyone is coming from so many different angles. And [I remember] also coming to the realisation that that is what a circus is supposed to be like. Everyone coming with all these crazy things. And then how that can be reflected in that idea of not being able to fit in: you actually do fit in when you come to the circus and it is a matter of trying to just squeeze the eccentricity onto the stage somehow. That’s what the process needs to be: how do you channel the chaos and find some sort of strange attractor within this framework? You can have that chaos and it’s actually quite awesome. (Frodo Santini, Interview, May 2015)

Santini not only describes the kind of “individuated aggregate” I explored above, but provides an insight into the fact that chaos within circus often begins in the training and creation of a new work, or during the formation of a new ensemble. Chaos is, in fact, an essential component of contemporary circus, not just in terms of the controlled chaos involved in the physical risk taking of the circus skills, but also in the process of bringing together an eclectic collection of personality types to share a creative space. Earlier I explored examples of artists’ awareness of the relations between creativity and chaos, such as Natano Fa’anana’s comment that Briefs Factory’s work feels as though it is at times held together with gaffer tape and hope, but that Briefs have the capacity to retain that chaos within a more refined product. Scott Maidment’s creative process of interweaving and curating personalities and individual talents into creative experiments that become shows that tour the globe, offers another perspective on the chaotic creative process within such work. Creative use of chaos is key to ongoing success for many companies in Australian contemporary circus.

It could be said that Australian contemporary circus tends to express a collective identity as an artform. This is doubtless directly connected to the classical family circus identity, inasmuch that as circus artists, we consider ourselves to belong to the circus, or more definitively The Circus. For example, when introducing themselves to those outside of the artform, circus artists will often say “I’m from The Circus”. In fact, we often also have a habit of introducing each other in this way. I recall sixth generation Ashton’s circus artist Chantel Ashton-Rodriguez once introducing me to members of another classical family circus as “Kristy is from The Circus too”, as though we are essentially, all from the same place, country or, indeed, territory.
In some ways it can seem a tad absurd to refer to an artform as *The Circus*. While I am yet to hear this phrase used in regard to artists from dance or music, as “Jenny is from The Dance”, “Fred is from The Music”, it is a usage that was once common in relation to “The Theatre” and “The Opera”, both of which have long histories of companies that structured themselves like families. In any case, given the extent of shared culture and ideology in circus, regardless of whether it is classical or contemporary, “The Circus” usage offers an introduction to an individual that ties them to a collective identity of circus. That collective identity is usually taken to be associated with the diversity and eccentricity of which Santini spoke. There is, it seems, a collection of traits and an overarching ethos that connects circus artists as a whole. In *World Circus Documentary* (2014) Kenneth Feld, who was at the time CEO of the famous *Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey Circus*\(^7\), shared his observations of circus people as a culture:

\(^7\)Billed as “The Greatest Show on Earth”, Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey performed their last ever show in May 2017, closing permanently. They cited the difficulties of laws around working with exotic animals as one of their many reasons for folding the iconic company that toured for close to two centuries in the USA.
There isn’t a lot written or there isn’t a lot on film as to what makes the circus. It is an emotion, it is a spirit, it is a feeling. Circus people are the greatest people I know. I have never seen diverse groups of people get along better than how they do in the circus. There is this feeling of family. Multiple cultures, all coming together for one goal. (Kenneth Feld, *World Circus Documentary*, 2014)

Of course, we do have separate identities as individual artists, identities that are often tied to our speciality, chosen discipline or artistic style: aerialist, tumbler, juggler and so on, but our collective identity is taken to hold similar values, and is a reflection of our shared artform. Remembering that circus artists often find themselves “outside belonging” (Probyn 1996) in relation to mainstream culture and given that the artform itself can be considered to be in a constant state of change, that is, an open-ended becoming, an in-between or intermezzo (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) it is not surprising that chaos and multiplicity are central components of the contemporary circus assemblage. In “Deleuze, Guattari, and the ‘Politics of Sorcery’”, Joshua Delpech-Ramey (2010) suggests that for Deleuze and Guattari, “genuine multiplicities will be found only through creative forms of becoming that develop across groups and interests, and the political will expressed will be inseparable from an open-ended *becoming*” (p. 20; emphasis in original).

In exploring the development, embodied practices, spatiality and vibrancy of Australian contemporary circus, I have used a range of interrelated concepts and terms – milieu, rhizome and rhizomics, assemblage, multiplicity and making multiplicities, in-between, intermezzo, open-ended becoming, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, intensities/speeds, lines of flight, strata, planes of consistency and immanence, smooth and striated spaces, rhythm, refrain, flow and so on. All of these share qualities, affects and directions of *movement*. The movements are non-linear, variable and always open to change, transformation and reconnection to themselves in the same space/time or in another space/time. Above all, the movements are always in-between, intermezzo. Open-ended becoming is thus one operational term that makes itself available as a way of thinking within, between and across both the full range of other operational terms, as well as within, between and across the full gamut of the haecceity of the contemporary circus in Australia.

When I summarise like this the conceptual fields I have moved through, I am more able to grasp why an investigation of the uses, eventness and affective potentials of chaos matters in explaining the fluidity, flow, singularities and remarkable collaborations and that occur in the creative processes of Australian contemporary
circus artists. It became clear to me in interviews that I was not alone in arriving at chaos as an absolutely necessary element in any practice philosophy: chaos, in Grosz’s sense, in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense, makes complete sense to those who have developed and continue to develop the highly skilled, risky, co-ordinated, habituated, *practised* rawness and edginess that have come to be expected of Australian manifestations of the artform.

The creative processes of making a new work almost invariably sees artists working in the middle of an in-between, looking both ways, on the verge, at the threshold of forming a new act, a new show, and at times a new style or aesthetic for the artform itself. Similarly, the history and lines of flight of Australian contemporary circus could be described as a process of continual de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation, producing a rhythm and simultaneously placing it in-between where that rhizome has been in relation to the milieu and where it might be going. Deleuze and Guattari frequently emphasise that the starting point for any becoming is always in the middle, such as when they write, “consolidation is not content to come after: it is creative. The fact is that the beginning always begins in-between, intermezzo” (1987, p.329).

Being in-between allows chaos to flow and it is only by doing this that multiplicity can make more multiplicity, which is, after all, what creativity aims to do: make more difference out of difference and so produce the “new” (that is never actually completely “new” precisely because of the in-between that many others including and since Barthes, have referred to as the intertext). Multiplicity is most obviously represented in contemporary circus in the hybridised circus skills and apparatus, many of which have been highly influenced by classical Chinese techniques; in the variety of styles, artistic signatures, performance values, aesthetics of companies and/or artists; and in the many extraordinary uses of spatiality. Perhaps the presence of multiplicities of many kinds is a defining characteristic, as signature or haecceity, of the Australian contemporary circus sector. By comparison, traditional/classical family circus exists in a more or less fixed state. I use the term fixed to define a consolidated format and style but I am not suggesting that as a negative trait. Traditional/classical family circus has altered itself in a range of ways over the past two centuries, most recently through some companies no longer working with animals. However, overall the format of a traditional/classical family circus touring show remains one that has a ringmaster, several intermittent clown acts, aerial acts and ground-based acts in its repertoire. Its ability to continue in its original classical form is an impressive achievement and a testament to its relevance. Perhaps, too, it is precisely what has kept audiences as
adults to take the next generation of children to see it. There is a certain nostalgic significance in the circus being what the circus is expected to be. Its clowns, acrobats and aerialists, nevertheless, are not different to contemporary circus performers in that they take risks with their bodies to produce that sense of continuity. What is different is the extent to which that element of risk is pushed to, even beyond, traditional limits, and in some Australian contemporary circus companies, the extent to which the element of risk is made very transparent in performance.

To make new work, create new affects that bring audiences new “edge of the seat” experiences, artists working from the middle and on-the-edge simultaneously, need to take themselves deliberately away from the familiar territories of their performances to date and into unfamiliar territories, out of organised, somewhat striated space and into smooth space, the space of chaos. This process of courting chaos can be understood as a movement of deterritorialisation. Bonta and Protevi (2004), drawing on complexity theory as well as on Deleuze and Guattari’s processual and operational modes of thinking, describe deterritorialisation in a particularly appropriate way for the context of contemporary circus and those who make new work in the artform:

Deterritorialization changes the ‘imbrication of the semiotic and material’ (337)\(^8^0\), the fit of the collective assemblage of enunciation and the machinic assemblage of bodies (87-9). In complexity theory terms, deterritorialization works by increasing or decreasing the intensity of certain system states past a critical threshold, which either moves the system to a previously established but non-actualized virtual attractor (‘relative deterritorialiszation’), or indeed prompts the release of a new set of attractors and bifurcators, new patterns and thresholds (‘absolute deterritorialization’). In plain language, deterritorialization is the process of leaving home, of altering your habits, of learning new tricks. (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, p.78)

In striving to create new perspectives on circus “tricks”, contemporary circus artists leave the (only relatively) safe space of previous work, entering a threshold moment, a chaos state, in which they are temporarily free to push the limits of their imaginations, their skills and their bodies. The eventual audience does not see this phase of “absolute deterritorialization” which takes the form, too, of absolute risk. The success of the gradual or rapid production of the “new trick” also depends on absolute trust in those others who are involved in the act of creation that constitutes the creation of the act. As the new performance, or new performance element, “comes together”, the sense of consolidation from a beginning in the in-between can be translated as feeling

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\(^{80}\) The references are all to Deleuze and Guattari (1987) A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.
as if the performer/s and the crew have “nailed it”. That is, the bodies, the context, the apparatus – all the elements involved – begin to be reterritorialised; to assemble themselves; to be ordered and striated, as is clearly necessary if the “new trick” is to be regularly repeated and embedded in public performance. A sense of chaos may or may not be part of the audience experience of the show in which the newly created element finds a home, but every new element has involved an entry into chaos, however large or small, in order to come into being and thus become-open to becoming otherwise in another moment of creation in another time and space. Thus the making of new work is marked by the same kinds of rhythms as the development of new companies, the transformation of existing companies, the relations-between bodies involved and produced in each performance, and so on.

**Social circus, multiplicity and inclusivity**

Although contemporary circus can be understood to operate in the intermezzo or in-between, having undergone various stages of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation since the late 1970s, at its centre the artform holds diversity and eccentricity as consistencies, as a rhizomic connection that runs all through it and manifests in all kinds of ways. As an insider researcher, a practitioner in the artform, having found my place to fit in to heterogeneity rather than blend into some homogeneity, I propose that the culture of Australian contemporary circus, its capacity to allow whatever being and being-such (Agamben 1993), provides a milieu that encompasses and enables eccentricity to foster into potential and innovation. As mentioned earlier, such a culture produces a creative space that sees excellence in artistic development and in community development, particularly in the field of social circus. Australia has earned a well-respected position in social circus internationally and has maintained a long-term partnership with *Cirque du Monde*, *Cirque du Soleil’s* social circus entity that operates on a global scale, developing and supporting best practice for social circus. Some of the earliest connections for the Australian social circus sector with *Cirque du Monde* were in conjunction with NICA as the key partner. NICA facilitated the delivery of the *Cirque du Monde* “Social circus trainer training” program, which was delivered at NICA’s venue. This program was offered annually for ten years with full subsidy of costs for all participants shared between *Cirque du Monde* and NICA. I undertook this intensive program in 2007. At the time I had just begun working with refugee children

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81 Unless, of course, this entry into being a total BwO has taken place for the first time in front of an audience as was case with Lewis and Gamsby and the meathook act’s first performance in the The Garden of Earthly Delights.
in Brisbane through my role at *Flipside Circus*. The *Cirque* training connected social intervention/social work techniques with elements of community circus practice to provide a general training in best practice for working with multiple types of at-risk communities. Although this “train the trainer” program is no longer running in Australia, *Cirque du Monde* continues to deliver the same type of training in other parts of the world. It has also maintained a connection to the Australian social circus sector through various modes of sponsorship, including providing free tickets to touring *Cirque du Soleil* shows for local social circus companies to distribute to their participants, and also by donating percentages of shows in each city to a key social circus company.

*Cirque du Monde* describes itself as:

...a *Cirque du Soleil* program that promotes circus arts as a means of intervention with youth-at-risk, an approach known as social circus. *Cirque du Monde* focuses its action on training practitioners, support for social circus organisations and advocacy on the benefits of social circus. (Company website)

As a long-term practitioner of social circus[^82], I have worked alongside some inspiring practitioners using circus for social change. In my experience, the concept of social circus is a wonderful example of making multiplicity. Operating in a similar manner to contemporary circus more broadly, social circus is in effect a zone of intensity in the artform, as a heightened space of inclusion and acceptance that can encompass any groups or individuals who may find themselves existing outside of, or on the fringes of society – simply overlooked, knowingly excluded, or completely alienated – they may feel left out, unnoticed, distrusted, perceived as ab-normal or dis-abled.

During a 2015 research residency in Montreal, I undertook an intensive period at *Cirque du Soleil* Headquarters working as a guest researcher with *Cirque du Monde*. There I learned that Australia is held in high regard in international social circus, our project outcomes across communities and ongoing work within the social circus realm being regarded as a substantial contribution to the social circus movement. This was an interesting discovery for me, because in Australian contemporary circus social circus is frequently positioned as something that occurs in the background of our industry. Only a small proportion of companies focus solely on social circus as their core business or company ideology. For the most part, practitioners and companies

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[^82]: Since 2007 I have worked in the social circus sector facilitating workshop programs for refugee children, street youth, indigenous Australian youth and more recently I now specialise in working with children and young people on the autism spectrum using circus as a tool for social, emotional and physical development.
add community-based projects of a social circus nature to their existing framework. That is, social circus is like an optional extra to the main game.

While maintaining a connection to at-risk communities is a shared ideology to some extent, it is significant that not all Australian contemporary circus companies include social circus in their work. Nevertheless, the culture of the artform contributes a set of values and practices that allow social circus to occur. The multiplicity and chaos of Australian contemporary circus invites “outsiders” in, setting an example that makes it more possible for people who feel different, or who know that others perceive them as different, to see themselves as participants and not only observers. Further, being ourselves a sector of outsiders, it is easier for us to recognise when other outsiders need somewhere to feel they are welcome: this is why a proportion of our industry has become involved in social circus in various ways.

The characteristics of the artform are also important, given that its expertise in the uses of chaos means that it can develop ways to bring a rhythm to the chaos of at-risk communities and outsiders. Individuals who may be perceived as chaotic subjects in/by the “assemblage of enunciation”, or dominant discourses of the social, learn to embody that perception by seeing themselves as disordered, unable to achieve by virtue of the disorder and lack of capacity seen to attend their existence. Such people can find a place as artists in contemporary circus companies and/or as social circus participants. The diversity that marks the sector means that practitioners in turn tap into a sense of belonging, regardless of their own eccentricities or idiosyncrasies. In social circus settings, the presence of diversity and multiplicity is total. Everyone is in one way or another different and in that, everyone shares something that social circus makes a point of valuing above all else. Social circus in Australia is often inspired by and developed with the same kind of imaginative leadership that characterises the sector overall.

Further research and scholarly attention is needed in relation to this field. Below is a brief overview of some of the leading projects/companies that have focused or currently focus solely on social circus (this does not include the array of individual practitioners around Australia working in the social circus realm nor does it include major companies that run short term social circus projects):

- Brewarrina Youth Circus (North West NSW): Indigenous youth circus project that ran from 2000-2010.
- Blackrobats (Far North Qld): Indigenous youth circus program.
• Circus Stars (Gold Coast, Qld): autism-focused youth circus program.
• Social Circus Tasmania.
• Cirque du Coraki (Northern NSW): an in-school program working with local Indigenous youth targeting their social and emotional well-being.
• Clowns without Borders Australia: small ensemble of practitioners who travel the world using social circus in at risk communities.

While I cannot provide an in-depth study of the Australian social circus sector, here I will draw briefly on my own experience with the autism community in order to provide an example of how the qualities of contemporary circus can encourage and establish a sense of competence, belonging and achievement for those who are differently abled. In 2010 I began working with children diagnosed with autism and rapidly found that the techniques I would usually deploy as a trainer in other social circus contexts appeared to be highly effective for children with autism on both a physical and emotional level.\(^{83}\) I discovered that not only do children on the spectrum benefit from the elements of circus training that work as physical therapy, but also they are able to find themselves within the chaos, creativity and multiplicity that circus offers. That is, they find a safe space to fit in without having to blend in or alter their identities. This sense of belonging in a group context helps them to feel as if they can belong, as they are, in their own lives. Being comfortable with oneself is not a familiar feeling for many of these children because by an early age they have often learnt that they are the problem, or at least, a problem.

Bolton (2004) demonstrated that circus can benefit many children. The combination of controlled chaos, idiosyncratic people, and exciting activities makes circus a very appealing setting for young people, and often they thrive. Children with autism are, in many cases, considered to be “chaotic subjects” in the sense that in any given moment they can fluctuate from being reserved and reclusive to being highly active and “highly strung”. Perceiving that they are regarded as disorderly, they commonly become anxious about their own behaviours. They can often be seen deploying ways to self-regulate and re-order themselves in order to dissipate their own chaos, for example with actions such as windmilling, or “stimming”\(^{84}\), repetitive movements such as rocking.

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\(^{83}\) I have written about how circus and autism can work together, initially in my MAM (Hons) thesis, “How circus training can enhance the well-being of children with autism and their families” (2012) and then in the co-authored article “Circus Training for Autistic Children: Creativity, Difference and Community” (Seymour and Wise, 2017). I have been an invited presenter at a range of conferences and symposia in the autism sector and among health professionals, and I continue to receive such invitations. See also my TEDx (2017) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5P85CTEc&t=594s.

\(^{84}\) The term “stimming” is often used by therapists in the autism sector to describe behaviours involving hyper-awareness of sensory stimuli that autistic people often display when they are seeking or avoiding sensory stimulation.
as well as reclusive behaviours by which they believe they are taking their chaos away from others and imposing order on themselves by being alone.

For children with autism a social circus workshop provides an opportunity to explore the play between allowing themselves to be exposed to and enjoy a sense of chaos in which they allow their senses to be open, and making a creative virtue of the kind of order that they are used to imposing, or trying to impose, on themselves in their day-to-day world. The practice of circus values their eccentricities, individual preferences, talents and modes of expression, while at the same time encouraging them to rely on and interact with other children and their circus trainers in order to execute a trick or acrobatic sequence. For those who sit outside of circus, it could readily appear as though the spectacle of circus, its frenetic physicality and frequent contact with others, risks a sensory overload for these children. Acrobats flying around and bouncing off each other, noise, unexpected events, and rapid movements all amount to a state of chaotic energy that would seem to be the exact opposite of what a child with autism “needs”. However, my experience affirms that when autistic children are immersed as participants in the state of creative chaos that circus provides, in fact they begin to draw upon senses that they usually repress in order to shield themselves from the world. In our co-authored article “Circus Training for Autistic Children: Creativity, Difference and Community” (2017) Patricia Wise and I discuss how this state of creative chaos enables autistic children to tap into their own chaos creatively and safely:

Suppose we place these children in a circus class that is, in effect, a parallel controlled state of chaos? They find themselves in a situation in which, for example, in preparation for walking on the tight-wire they are encouraged only to walk on the one rope stretched out on the floor, over and over. Training exercises like this obviously allow children with autism to utilize their techniques of control in ways that also help them to focus their bodies on balancing, on connecting left and right brain, and concentrating on a task devised by someone else. (Seymour and Wise, 2017, p.88)

We explain how the presence of chaos allows them to connect to themselves in ways which they may not be offered or may not encounter outside of a circus space:

Thus, in a circus class they are encouraged to spend extensive periods embracing their desire for repetitive actions and movements, which in turn enhances a comfortable sense of embodiment. To a considerable extent they are able to experience how it feels to ‘be themselves’ in a productive context, learning how to undertake a creative practice in which they are not constrained by their awareness – and/or their family’s awareness – of what is socially ‘outside’ of ‘normal’ behaviours. The creative energy that circus culture
produces, along with the physical risk it promises, provide a unique environment for many special needs children to grow and embrace their particular ways of being in the world: their singularity; their difference. (Seymour and Wise, 2017, p.89)

Circus can provide autistic children with the scope to express themselves and their feelings more freely than they “normally” do, to embrace their singularity, to harness their idiosyncratic behaviours towards positive outcomes. Physically they are challenging themselves, developing body awareness and fitness. Mentally and emotionally they are achieving feats they may have considered to be impossible, gaining confidence in themselves and learning to trust their bodies to hold them up to that they can balance safely. They also spend time with other children who do not regard them as odd, because those children know how it is and how it feels to be different. Further, it is significant that children with autism perpetually occupy an in-between of chaos and order, introversion and liveliness. The circus enables them to situate their own becoming alongside others who are also developing in confidence and skills.

The problematics of the in-between

Clearly there are advantages and disadvantages inherent to how chaos and multiplicity function as consistencies for Australian contemporary circus. Chaos and multiplicity allow the artform to balance delicately on the edges of definitions of genres, styles and aesthetics, allowing more ready pollination, germination and growth of new companies and new works with influences that shift the expected characteristics of the form for its audiences. The consequent multiplicity of forms provides artists with further freedom to create as they choose, rather than conforming to a formula, producing what is expected to be “Circus”. However, operating in-between is not always a benefit because with it comes social, creative and financial risk. As discussed above (Chapter Six), artists are regularly faced with a choice between creating work for artistic expression or for commercial venture. It is also often the case that they achieve both, and I have given a number of examples of companies, shows and performance choices where the two marry well; where highly artistic and/or highly political work is successfully sustained financially. Circus does not exist in a constant state of internal binary opposition. In this sense, the risks are outweighed by the productivity.

The definitive qualities of eccentricity, chaos and multiplicity can mean that contemporary Australian circus can often be misperceived and undervalued. It is recurrently struggling to be taken seriously as a major artform despite its indisputable
success internationally. As discussed in Chapter One, from its earliest history circus has been regularly situated as on the fringe of the arts, or perhaps more precisely, an artform consisting of fringe dwellers. And although circus has existed as an artform of global significance for well over two centuries, it is yet to be widely recognised as a leading artform by government bodies in the same ways as theatre and dance are recognised. Further, having “circus artist” as your occupation often sparks questions that insinuate that you must surely have a “real job”; that something as frivolous as the circus couldn't possibly earn a sustainable living and so on. Frodo Santini discussed how frustrating this can be for circus artists who dedicate their lives (and in many instances their bodies) to their art:

I began writing a blog many years ago as a way of dealing with what we all have to endure as people who have chosen this career of the circus. It is that ongoing question of “when are you going to get a real job?” or “what is your real job?” Because the frivolity and fun of what we do makes it seem like it can’t possibly be work because work is not supposed to be like that. People ask these questions because when they look at it, they don’t always see the depth of meticulous rehearsal and refining of the acts that make it seamless. (Frodo Santini, Interview, May 2015)

In *What is Philosophy*, Deleuze and Guattari (1994) discuss how when art and chaos meet, the outcome can be necessary tension: “Art indeed struggles with chaos, but it does so in order to bring forth a vision that illuminates it for an instant, a Sensation” (1994, p. 204). I have argued that chaos is a necessary component of contemporary Australian circus, not only because of its role in rehearsal but for a number of leading companies, in a performance style that cultivates a sense of chaos from the audience’s point of view. If entering into chaos and cultivating an illusion of chaos are accepted as characteristic of the form, how can we elevate the perception of it in government funding agencies and among some other artforms, without losing precisely what produces its audience appeal and so makes it so successful? Reg Bolton noted that, “[m]uch of the value and appeal of circus is that it is relatively unexplored and unexplained” (2004, p.1). Reflecting on Bolton's observations, it seems that there may be negative outcomes involved in making our work and its performance values too transparent; that in doing so we could remove the impact, indeed the “magic”, of the form’s characteristic risk, obscurity and ambiguity and perhaps place it in danger of becoming aesthetically mediocre or mainstream. On the other hand, there are possibly more significant dangers in the very lack of an articulated philosophy of performance, a conceptual framework through which to think about contemporary Australian circus as a significant artform, and an analytics that enable us to understand how its performance values function to render it appealing to a rapidly developing audience...
base and an ever-widening demographic. Given my reliance throughout on Deleuzian modes of processual thinking, it is important to resist producing another either/or, between “preserving the magic and mystery” and approaching circus as art with the same degree of rigour that is deployed in relation to other major artforms. Contemporary circus can retain its “fun”, its chaos, its diversity of personnel and its variety of styles, and expect to be taken seriously and to be thought about rigorously and a sizeable proportion of the sector can be appreciated for its ingenuity in surviving as independent companies, collectives and individual artists by cultivating considerable international success based precisely on the same idiosyncratic characteristics that lead funding bodies to treat it as “not a serious, major artform”. As has ever been the case, the picture is much more complex, nuanced and open to analysis than a surface reading might suggest.

Resisting definitions

The chaos and multiplicity that apparently makes circus “hard” to categorise for many festival programmers, government funding bodies and sometimes audiences, are the very things that make it stand out from its sister artforms, theatre and dance. The issue of how to define ourselves as artform, but also whether we need to define ourselves at all, has for several years been a regular topic of discussion at national circus conferences and gatherings in the Australian contemporary circus sector. For the most part as an industry we seem to arrive at an impasse. My view is that we are actually quite fond of our “otherness” and are not willing to give it up just to be better understood. In many ways it is our otherness, our difference that defines us as circus artists and in turn as an artform. Our ability to hold a collective identity that operates in-between is one of the defining characteristics of the artform. Of course, we do not teeter between traditional definitions, existing within an in-between precariously. What is established, and in fact has been for over two centuries of traditional/classical circus, is a rhythm that allows multiplicity and chaos to merge. As Deleuze and Guattari explain:

Rhythm is the milieus’ answer to chaos. What chaos and rhythm have in common is the in-between – between two milieus, rhythm-chaos or the chaosmos: ‘Between night and day, between that which is constructed and that which grows naturally...’. (1987, p.313)

However, operating between two milieus is quite possibly what sees us without our own funding category on government funding applications and at times in festival programs. In funding applications, we are to choose between the boxes of either theatre or dance. Often funding advisors encourage us to apply under the theatre
section, which as a practitioner and grant assessor I find problematic because patently we are not a theatre practice: we are for the most part a non-verbal artform which often presents its work in alternative venues that are frequently not within theatre contexts and further, our audiences do not come to see theatre, but circus. Our second option, the dance category, is equally problematic in that although we are a physical artform, we are vastly different in our physical approaches to our dance counterparts. So why doesn’t contemporary circus have a category and boxes-to-tick of its own on government funding applications when as an artform we have been highly influential in international and local touring, exporting our creative work across the globe to major festivals for close to four decades? Festival programming is improving in its comprehension of the artform with most festivals carrying a circus/physical theatre category within their artistic program descriptions, however those who don’t will often program Australian contemporary circus companies under the banner of ‘dance’ in their programming and marketing.

Surely it is time for governments and the rest of the national arts industry to acknowledge and accept contemporary circus as its own artform and not a fringe dweller of theatre and dance. Given that Australian contemporary circus has been and continues to be a leader and innovator in the form and is held in very high esteem by the global contemporary circus sector, some recognition of our status as a distinct artform in our own country would be a considerable step forward. As Kim Kaos, a long-term Australian circus artist put it at the 2015 ACAPTA sector session on the Gold Coast, “Circus is an artform, not a sub-set of theatre.”

Perhaps Australian contemporary circus needs to recognise that it is ready to articulate to those outside the artform that we not only hold our multiplicity and chaos in high regard, we make a creative virtue of them, and that there is in fact a rhythm and order to the circus that operates beyond the veneer of fun and entertainment. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) explain that “Art is not chaos but a composition of chaos that yields the vision or sensation, so that it constitutes as Joyce says, a chaosmos, a composed chaos – neither foreseen nor preconceived” (1994, p.204). By not succumbing to an expectation to provide neat and linear explanations of itself, contemporary circus can continue to deterritorialise and reterritorialise in its creation of performances, throughout the different styles that proliferate in the sector, as well as across the milieu that generates the sector and that the sector generates. Without conforming to a fixed state, Australian contemporary circus can continue to create new lines of flight and
new becomings that still hold the signatures and tracings of its whole trajectory, thus allowing it to retain its otherness, its place in-between, and its rhythm of chaos.

**Australian contemporary circus: the future**

Throughout the process of this research I have set out to map the trajectory of the Australian contemporary circus sector, its lines of flight within its national identity and its influence on the international sector. I have presented the threads of historical narratives that may provide an insight into the extensive reach and artistic development of Australian circus in its contemporary setting. My intention has been to offer reflexive, theoretical and conceptual scholarly inquiry to the burgeoning field of contemporary circus research, with Australia as the focal point. There has been no attention given in previous scholarly work to how the Australian contemporary circus sector is constituted, fits together and contributes to the long-term growth and development of the artform as a whole. I aimed to begin to fill these gaps, while also documenting the Australian sector for emerging and established practitioners. What I offer here is a starting point for further research into the history and cultural impact of contemporary circus in Australia, an introduction to the key companies that are currently steering the sector to a reputation of global significance, and some suggestions towards how we might conceptualise, analyse, talk about and write about our artform.

Circus is primarily a physical artform, and there is very little scripting of shows, therefore the documentation of the artform to date is limited to minor archives of written documents with the bulk of records existing in the form of film and images. The accounts of its history being mostly oral and anecdotal, it is important for the next generation of circus practitioners to begin their artistic practice with a greater understanding of what has come before them and how they might think about their practice. There is great value in sharing key elements in the artform's history and reflection on content that has been created so far, to enable emerging circus artists to continue their artform's legacy as a basis to fostering new developments. As Csikszentmihalyi (1996) argues:

> The organization of knowledge is especially important when it comes to passing it down to the next generation. To be creative, a person must first understand their domain. If the knowledge in the domain is nearly incomprehensible, few young people will bother learning it, and thus the chances of creative innovations will be less. But sometimes there are equally valid conflicting claims about how knowledge should be transmitted. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.340)
My research so far offers a framework for thinking and investigation of the artform that is reflected in the retelling and mapping of the milieu that developed, the rhizomics that flowed from and to that milieu and thus the developmental story of the sector. At the same time, my work suggests ways of approaching the critical analysis of the artform and its influence on contemporary physical performance. In exploring the impact of the artform’s work in exploring and challenging gender constructions and other aspects of normative values; how the spatiality of circus cities in Australia has shaped the direction of the artform in each state to form smaller territorial assemblages linked rhizomically within the assemblage that is wider national sector; and the rapid growth of new forms of company structures that has seen independent companies leading the field, I have provided at least one approach to analysis of the artform’s development and influence on local and global scales.

Key to the set of characteristics that make up the haecceity and signature of the artform is the ongoing presence of chaos and multiplicity. The artform’s ability to operate within an in-between facilitates the continuation and growth of its characteristics, its embrace of chaos in its creative processes and its welcoming of diversity. This is what enables it to continue to operate always as an open-ended becoming. Deleuze and Guattari put it thus:

> In this in-between, chaos becomes rhythm, not inexorably, but it has a chance to. Chaos is not the opposite of rhythm, but the milieu of all milieus. There is a rhythm whenever there is a transcoded passage from one milieu to another, a communication of milieus, coordination between heterogeneous space-times. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.313)

I have mentioned that 2018 will mark two hundred and fifty years of the circus⁸⁵, with festivities in various parts of the world but Europe holding the bulk of official celebrations, including festivals and conference panels. Coincidentally, 2018 also marks a major milestone for Circus Oz which will be celebrating forty years as an incorporated company while Flipside Circus will commemorate its twentieth year as the leading youth circus in Queensland. With forty years of contemporary circus in Australia, the sector has surely proved itself as a major player in the national performing arts landscape. We need to wonder whether Australian governments and elements of the arts sector continue to leave that standing unrecognised because contemporary circus consists of many lines of flight that form an assemblage that is in

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⁸⁵ In 2018 the artform will be celebrating a milestone of two hundred and fifty years since Philip Astley began his career and as a consequence introduced the concept of circus to the world. There will be commemorative events held across in major cities across the world. (www.circus250.com)
a constant state of shifting, transforming, becoming otherwise, without an identifiable or fixed order.

As already outlined the historical narrative of the artform in this thesis is predominantly derived from the collective imagination of the sector, that is, my interviews with key practitioners across various aspects of the industry, my own lived experience of the artform since 1999 and the small amount of available archival material that I have accessed. The artform continues to shift and grow rapidly with new lines of flight emerging each year. New company structures were a feature of the emergence of New Circus as a resistance to the usual, to a “this is how it is always been done” mindset, and to the organisation of the established arts industry as well as to traditional/classical circus. In Deleuzian terms, as an artform circus is constantly jumping on and off the plane of consistency to re-configure and recreate itself. This is why it is in a constant state of open-ended becoming, of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.

Pure relations of speed and slowness between particles imply movements of deterritorialization, just as pure affects imply an enterprise of desubjectification. Moreover the plane of consistency does not preexist the movements of deterritorialization that unravel it, the lines of flight that draw it to rise to the surface, the becomings that compose it. The plane of organization is constantly working away at the plane of consistency, always trying to plug the lines of flight, stop or interrupt the movements of deterritorialization, weigh them down, restratify them, reconstitute forms and subjects in a dimension of depth. Conversely, the plane of consistency is constantly extricating itself from the plane of organization, causing particles to spin off the strata, scrambling forms by dint of speed or slowness, breaking down functions by means of assemblages or microassemblages. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.270)

We can trace the artform's history back through the lines of flight and consider how they intersect or emerge from one another, however to pin down a “formula” for contemporary circus is challenging due to its capacity to evolve and shift every five to ten years, because it continues to deterritorialize itself. This is a reflection of the rhizomic nature of the artform; its ability to weave across itself, to start up new nodes in new places and draw connections back across itself. Forty years ago, there was one major company leading the artform with Circus Oz initially deterritorialising the traditional/classical family circus model. At present we have multiple companies emerging every year, some of which emerge from other companies or from collaborations within the sector. And although we can link the majority of these lines of flight back to the formation of Circus Oz in 1978, we cannot reduce or summarise the industry by looking to Circus Oz alone. As discussed in Chapter One a rhizome is not reducible to the One or to a multiple: it does not possess a specific beginning or an
end, but is instead always a middle that goes beyond boundaries and overspills them (1987, p.23).

As discussed in earlier, multiplicity is central to the success and resilience of the artform, however for those outside contemporary circus, the various genres, artistic aesthetics and creative ideologies that operate within the Australian milieu are not always explicit or identifiable. Prior to his doctoral thesis, Bolton questioned the need to provide an explanation of the depths of the artform of circus and its potential beyond the spectacle and high flying that it is mostly recognised for:

Do we want them to see beyond the surface? Or are we quite happy to let them think what they want to think? I say that because I am fed up with saying, “There’s a lot more to it than you think. This is really deep.” They say “Oh Yeah” and yawn. They don’t want to know. We don’t have to tell them. We just have to make the surface pretty brilliant and leave it at that. (Bolton, 2001)

As a sector we could carry on with our practice and not invite audiences and critics to think beyond the spectacle that sits on the surface of the circus, some seventeen years on from Bolton’s reflections, as a practitioner and a researcher I believe it is now time for the artform to step outside of itself in order to understand itself more willingly. That is, to invite scholarly inquiry, to partner with other sectors, to go beyond the networks that operate within the circus in order to bring a wider understanding of the artform and its potential. Understandably this has been somewhat of a sensitive subject for the contemporary circus sector due to the fear that “giving too much away” could diminish the eccentricity, complexity and quirkiness that makes the artform what it is; that these qualities may be compromised if we analyse the artform rigorously and in significant depth. However, if we are to elevate the perception of Australian contemporary circus beyond an image as "the people's artform" that Davy Sampford spoke of, then we need to invite more opportunities for open dialogues and inquiries to occur. A greater understanding of the artform is more likely to lead to it being recognised with the same status as dance and theatre.

It became apparent to me during my doctoral candidature that finding the balance between keeping the complexity of the artform operating while also “lifting the curtain” to outside perspectives, presents a similar challenge to that of being an insider researcher. That is, it highlights the importance of maintaining an awareness of the potential bias of my own position and the “lens of the artist” with which I began my research process, striving to undertake measures to ensure that my perspectives as an artist did not overshadow my ability to undertake a critical analysis of the sector. At
the same time my position as insider researcher enabled me to utilise my industry position and inside knowledge to gain access to interviewees and archival material that may not be have been accessible to a researcher from outside of the artform. It also helped me to bring a lived experience to bear on the field I was investigating. Striking this exact balance was potentially the central challenge of my doctoral project. Nonetheless as Csikszentmihalyi comments, the pursuit of any creative problem is often riddled with complexity:

> The pursuit of a creative problem is rarely easy. In fact, in order to be enjoyable it should be hard, and of course so it is, almost by definition. It is never easy to break new ground, to venture into the unknown. (1996, p.116)

My intention is to provide a creative and intellectual path that will see a continuation from this doctoral project. I aim to collaborate with industry peers and companies, and potentially partner with research centres, to create more detailed archival research for the Australian contemporary circus sector and further conceptual inquiry into contemporary circus as an artform. My optimism as a circus artist makes me hopeful that the contemporary circus industry will critique and question itself on a scholarly platform and that in turn the academy will foster an intellectual space that enables the field of circus research to thrive and develop, to correspond with the continuous growth of the artform.
Appendix 1: Interviewees

The following people contributed to this research through providing their invaluable insights in extensive interviews. Dates of interviews are given in in-text citations.

- Davy Sampford: Juggler; past member of Rock n Roll Circus/Circa; founding member of Briefs; Flipside Circus trainer
- Ira Seidenstien: Clown; director
- Sue Broadway: Aerialist; clown; director; founding member of Circus Oz
- Frodo Santini (Captain Frodo): Sideshow artist – contortionist; sword swallower; founding member of Happy Sideshow Collective
- Anni Davey: Aerialist/acrobat; Circus Oz’ former member of The Party Line, Club Swing
- Scott Maidment: Creative Director of Strut n Fret Production House
- Jesse Scott: Acrobat; co-founder of Casus Circus; past student of Flying Fruit Fly Circus
- Natano Fa'anana: Aerialist/acrobat; co-founder of Casus Circus; founding member of Briefs Factory
- Mike Finch: Director; former director of Circus Oz for 16years
- Guang Rong Lu (Mr Lu): Acrobat; Master Trainer, National Institute of Circus Arts; past Master Trainer, Flying Fruit Fly Circus; Master Trainer for Nanjing Projects I, II.
- Gail Kelly: Artistic director; extensive experience with many companies as resident or guest director; long term director of industry association, ACAPTA
- Marisol de Santis: Programmer at La Tohu Performance Centre, Montreal; artistic programmer of Montreal Completement Cirque Festival.
- Celia White: Aerialist/acrobat; artistic director feminist circus artist; member Legs on the Wall; Vulcana Women’s Circus
- Rudi Mineur: Acrobat; trainer; Rock n Roll Circus/Circa
- Antonella Casella: Aerialist/acrobat; founder of Vulcana Women’s Circus, founding member of Rock n Roll Circus, senior artistic associate of Circus Oz
- Chelsea McGuffin: Aerialist/acrobat; past member Circus Monoxide, Rock n Roll Circus/Circa; founder of Company 2.
Appendix 2: Video links

This list provides links to video footage of some the key companies/key performances mentioned in the thesis

**Acrobat**

Smaller Poorer Cheaper *video contains full frontal nudity*  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqNfRWKCPzg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqNfRWKCPzg)

**Briefs Factory**

Briefs the Second Coming [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCi2XVYNnb4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCi2XVYNnb4)  
Briefs Close Encounters [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0GArg41WL0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0GArg41WL0)

**Captain Frodo**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dssqNy0HyLI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dssqNy0HyLI)

**Circa**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lfjdlB8lp8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lfjdlB8lp8)

**Circus Oz**

Mel Fyfe [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1R4nm62fm3I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1R4nm62fm3I)

**Club Swing**


**Casus**

Knee Deep [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlmPf83lt7l](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlmPf83lt7l)

**Derek Ives**

Bucket of Love [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-39xFijnpbU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-39xFijnpbU)

**Gordo Gamsby and Ben Lewis**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmXiGeEkizY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmXiGeEkizY)

**Gravity and Other Myths (GOM)**

A Simple Space [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fio_KPtjjiY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fio_KPtjjiY)
**Legs on the Wall**
Homelands [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yz6cdOJAb0s&t=67s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yz6cdOJAb0s&t=67s)

**Mr Lu**

**Natano Fa’anana**
Aerial silks tattoo [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVOB8NaTGmI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVOB8NaTGmI)

**Rock n Roll Circus**
Love Stunts [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKTvGvPzgZY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKTvGvPzgZY)

**Strut n Fret Production House**
Blanc de Blanc [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nJGi_lAfQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nJGi_lAfQ)
LIMBO [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rB_ylTi4WiA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rB_ylTi4WiA)
Tom Tom Crew [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlO3YzhDqkw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlO3YzhDqkw)
Appendix 3: Ethics consent package

Protocol number: HUM/17/14/HREC

Information Sheet

Consent Form
PhD RESEARCH PROJECT

Contemporary Circus in Australia: a conceptual and historical study

INFORMATION SHEET

RESEARCH TEAM

Supervisor and contact person: Associate Professor Patricia Wise

Email address: p.wise@griffith.edu.au

Phone: 07 5528620

Student researcher and interviewer: Kristy Seymour

Email: kristy.seymour@griffithuni.edu.au

Why is the research being conducted?

The project is to map the history of contemporary circus in Australia, from the 1970s to the present, investigate its cultural influence and position it in relation to the international development of alternative circus practice. This history has never been documented in a detailed work of scholarship, and there has been little scholarly attention to matters such as practice philosophy, company structures, and engagements with other arts sectors.

The research and analysis will reveal the extent to which features of the form and practice have been based in a desire to express alternative subject positions, engage with local communities, address socio-political issues, and provide participatory opportunities for people of all backgrounds, including marginalised groups (e.g., youth at risk, people with disabilities, refugees). Consistent with such aims, these circus companies and groups have established organisational arrangements perceived as collaborative, democratic, participative and counter-hegemonic. Thus, in addition to notions of alternative arts practice and aspects of spectacle and outdoor performance, my theoretical engagements will need to support discussion of community, identity, power relations, age, gender and cross-cultural experience.

What will you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be asked to undertake a one-hour long interview with Kristy Seymour in a location of your choice, which is also convenient for you to travel to and from. The interview will be audio recorded. You may stop the interview at any time, for any reason. If you choose, you may request a transcript of your interview.
How were you selected?

You have been selected based on your own professional work in this area within the circus industry. Participation in this research is completely voluntary, and a choice to not be involved will in no way impact on any relationships you may have with the research team or Griffith University.

What are the expected benefits of this research?

The aim of the research is to document and explore the history of Contemporary Circus in Australia. The project aims to spread awareness of the industry’s vast and poignant work and to delve into the art form from an academic perspective as well as an historical one.

Your confidentiality

Your confidentiality will be respected at all times. You may choose to remain anonymous in the reporting of the research. After an initial interview, and before any form of publication, the researcher will consult with all individuals who are identified in the outcomes of the research. If you have chosen to be an identified participant, you will be able to read and comment on information relating to you and you will have the opportunity to make adjustments or withdraw quoted comments at this stage. Once the thesis has been presented for examination, no further changes will be possible.

If you choose to remain anonymous you will be given a pseudonym which will be used throughout the research and reporting process.

Your participation is voluntary

You are assured that your participation is voluntary. If you choose to be interviewed, you may withdraw from the process at any stage. Your participation can be anonymous and will in no way be used to impact adversely on any relationship you have with the organisation you are involved with or the research team.

Questions/Further information

For further information regarding this project you can contact Associate Professor Patricia Wise, Griffith University Gold Coast Campus (07) 55528620 or email p.wise@griffith.edu.au

The ethical conduct of this research

This research project is being conducted in accordance with Griffith University Ethical Guidelines and with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If potential participants have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project they should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 07 37355585 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au

Feedback to participants

As mentioned above you will be informed of the research results throughout the process.
Privacy Statement

If you have chosen to be identified, the following privacy statement applies to you:

The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of your identified information. As outlined elsewhere in this information sheet, your identified personal information may appear in publications/reports arising from this research. This is occurring with your consent. Any additional personal information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. However, your anonymity will at all times be safeguarded, except where you have consented otherwise. For further information consult the University's privacy plan at: www.gu.edu.au/ua/vc/pp or telephone (07) 37355585.
PhD RESEARCH PROJECT

Contemporary Circus in Australia: a conceptual and historical study

CONSENT FORM

Research Team:

Supervisor and contact person: Associate Professor Patricia Wise

Email address: p.wise@griffith.edu.au

Phone: 07 5528620

Student researcher and interviewer: Kristy Seymour

Email: kristy.seymour@griffithuni.edu.au

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the information package and in particular have noted that:

- I understand my involvement in this research will include a one-hour interview with Kristy Seymour
- I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction
- I understand that there are no risks involved
- I understand that there will be no direct benefit to me from my participation in the research although it aims to benefit the community of which I am a member
- I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary
- I understand that I if I have any additional questions I can contact the Supervisor
- I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty
- I understand that I can choose not to be identified and that my confidentiality and privacy will be protected as indicated in the information sheet
- I understand that I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 07 37355585 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the project, and
- I agree to participate in the project

Name:

Signature:

Date:
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