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# A contemporary history of circus arts in Buenos Aires, Argentina: the post-dictatorial resurgence and revaluation of circus as a popular art

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*Focusing on the case of circus arts, this article examines the resurgence and redefinition of popular practices that occurred in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, during the post-dictatorial years of the 1980s-1990s. The author first presents historical data that enables an understanding of the transitional legitimacy given to circus in the late nineteenth century and synthetically introduces the social processes that subsequently caused circus to enter a period of contraction. Attention then shifts to the social actors who recovered these artistic languages in the post-dictatorship decades of the 1980s-1990s, contextualising their practices with the socio-political changes of the time. The author's analysis centres on the ways that these young artists recovered certain elements of Argentina's popular entertainment heritage and blended these with new performance initiatives as they sought to legitimate their politically and socially engaged arts practices. Julieta Infantino is a Professor at the University of Buenos Aires where she serves as a researcher for the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET). She belongs to several research teams linked to the study of popular culture, folklore, heritage and youth practices and has published books, compilations and articles in national and international journals.*

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Keywords: "Circo Criollo", democratisation of arts, New Circus, Street Circus, Social Circus, popular arts, post-dictatorship Argentina

## **Introduction**

Until recently in Argentina it was common to think of Circus with nostalgia, as a popular art sporadically found in the suburbs, or in the margins of society. However, a resurgence of the circus arts took place during the post-dictatorial 1980s and has intensified in the decades since. In this article I bring forward some aspects of a more extensive research project that, through

the case of circus arts, focuses on the process of resurgence and redefinition of popular practices that developed in Buenos Aires from the post-dictatorial years up to the present.<sup>1</sup> One of the questions guiding this article is: how has circus, historically devalued as a 'minor' and 'popular' art, begun to be recovered by young artists to the point where it now occupies spaces of greater artistic legitimacy? I will analyse the trajectories of some central characters in this history and provide information about the contemporary field of an art form that has long been undervalued. It should be noted that my research has focused on artists who were not born into 'family' circuses and therefore did not come from the circus tradition. They were young men and women who learned circus arts in schools, Cultural Centres offering a range of artistic workshops, or in the various educational settings that had appeared by the latter years of the last military dictatorship (1976-1983).

Theoretically, I approached these young artists as a "cultural formation," a concept used by Raymond Williams to analyse how, in different contexts, artists gather for the common pursuit of specific artistic goals. Williams highlights the methodological difficulties in the study of cultural formations as they are often characterised by low formality, small numbers of people, by the short duration of the organisation, and by complexities of internal splits and mergers. However, this concept enables studying organisational modes, shared experiences, points of conjunction, and fractions and disputes both within the groups and in relation to external agencies.<sup>2</sup>

To study how these artists reconfigured the artistic genre I have used the concept of traditionalisation, understood as a selection process in which subjects appropriate a significant fragment of the past to legitimise their contemporary practice.<sup>3</sup> At each performance or enactment, previous performances are updated but are also recreated and adapted to new contexts. The notion of an emergent quality in every performance refers to the dynamic tension between the socially given, the conventionalised, the past, and the emergent. It enables the problematisation of how subjects recover certain elements of the past to give sense to the present activity, to legitimise their practices and challenge their recognition.

While the temporal focus of this research is on the recent past, when speaking of revaluation of circus it is essential to refer to a larger historical process. In the development of the circus, there have been periods when it was promoted as an emblem of national art (during the late nineteenth century for example), and times when this transitional legitimacy was rejected and circus was instead devalued as a minor art. Historically, the hierarchical rating of art in Argentina responded to the preponderance of a classic aesthetic canon; circus, from its origins as an art form, was positioned as the opposite of the classical ideal, appealing to a grotesque aesthetic characterised by bodies of exaggerated dimensions on stilts, freaks, bearded ladies, prominent noses, and exaggerated smiles. Circus has historically highlighted what modern people should control: passion, enjoyment, laughter, and imagination. It is from the hegemonic rating of art that circus came to be considered as an inferior art form, as a curiosity, or as a minor art.<sup>4</sup>

I will first present some historical data that will enable an understanding of the transitional legitimacy given to circus in the late nineteenth century and I will synthetically introduce the social processes that led circus into an epoch of contraction. Then I will focus on the social actors who recovered these artistic languages in the post-dictatorship. This will lead us to the analysis of a new democratic spirit during the 1980s, and the consequent development of popular performances and new and street circus in the 1990s. I will examine the socio-political formations of the 1980s and 1990s that were mainly characterised by a blend of innovative practices and the recovery of past traditions. Selecting from events in each of these decades, some aspects of the socio-political and economic context will be analysed so as to gain an insight into the artistic choices made by young artists at this time, the social actors in the resurgence of circus in Buenos Aires.

### ***Circus in the nineteenth century: the history of a transitional legitimacy***

Nomadic acrobats in the mid-eighteenth century and then the big circus touring companies in the nineteenth century initiated the beginning of circus activities in Argentina. Over the years, many touring circus families established themselves in the country.<sup>5</sup> It was not until the late nineteenth century, however, that circus began to be regarded as a legitimate art form within the local cultural scene. This coincides precisely with the presentation, first as a pantomime (1884) and then as spoken drama (1886) of the play *Juan Moreira*, a story originally written by Eduardo Gutiérrez and translated into a theatre piece by José Podesta, a recognised circus performer at the time. *Juan Moreira* is arguably the main character of Popular Criollismo, a cultural and literary movement that developed between 1880 and 1910. Using a realist style to portray the scenes, language, customs and manners of the countryside, especially those of the lower and peasant classes, Criollismo led to an original literature, mostly epic and foundational, drawn from rural life. Its subject matter was strongly influenced by the wars of independence from Spain; centering on the figure of the man on horseback, this literature reinforced the character of a stereotyped and righteous rebel gaucho, wandering freely in the vastness of the Argentinean Pampa.<sup>6</sup>

It is considered that from the premiere of the play *Juan Moreira*, an original variant of the circus genre was born: the so-called *Circo Criollo*. This sub-genre was composed of a first part, with typical circus skills and humour, and a second part, representing the plays of Argentinean Popular Criollismo.<sup>7</sup> Thus, a popular show, which bridged the popular narrative tradition and the staging of circus performance, was forged. The expressive resources used in the proceedings of this popular art form involved a strong commitment to the realism of the scenes. Both the argument of the unfortunate gaucho, an innocent victim of abuse who is pushed to rise against injustice and modernisation, and the expressive resources that reinforced the realism of performances attracted the support of the public.

The emergence of *Circo Criollo* as a local variant of the circus genre was established as a distinctive mark of the Argentinean circus in the face of European and American models. The distinction was based on the show format

of a first and second part in which a slip between the circus and theatrical practices was generated. During the performances of the Criollo Circuses, actors in the first part demonstrated their skills as trapeze artists, acrobats and comedians, while in the second part of the show they interpreted their roles as dramatic actors. With energetic stage action, authentic costuming, pictorial settings representing landscapes typical of the Argentine countryside, gauchos on horseback, and folk music and dances developed into a finale, the plays included in the second part were more akin to theatrical melodrama than to plays of the eminently literary dramatic tradition valued by the Argentinian artistic elite. The mixture of comedy and circus skills alongside popular drama inspired by the works of Popular Criollismo, is what distinguished Criollo Circus as a unique form, a circus model that, despite local variants, also characterised the circus-theatre of Brazil.<sup>8</sup>

As a literary and artistic movement, the Popular Criollismo (amplified by the transpositions made by the Circo Criollo) became a tool for the construction and consolidation of national identity, and circus arts thus became an emblem of national art in the late nineteenth century. The causes of this transitional valorisation must be analysed taking into account the context of time. The ruling classes in the middle of the century had opted to populate Argentina with immigrant workers in order to increase exports considered to be synonymous with economic development. After the extermination of the indigenous population, and with their former land released, it was expected that the newly opened territory would be populated with a skilled labour force. There was an expectation that the desired immigrants (from Central and North Europe) would have particular virtues that would in turn bring economic prosperity, political stability, cultural development and modernisation. Meanwhile, local residents (Criollos) were depicted as lazy, ignorant and without the desire for progress. However, the immigrants who arrived in Argentina were not the desired ones. They came from the poorest sectors of Europe, and the land reclaimed from indigenous people was soon monopolised by the local aristocracy. This meant that immigrants settled in coastal cities, mainly in Buenos Aires, working in services and trades and not, as originally planned, in agriculture. Over the years, however, these immigrants began to experience social mobility, forging a new immigrant middle class that threatened the hegemony of the local aristocracy.<sup>9</sup>

In this social context, nationalism flourished. The cultural impact of immigration and the possible destruction of vernacular values worried the leading sectors and eventually there emerged a new image of immigrants as unscrupulous, materialistic, and devoid of aristocratic European culture. Meanwhile, through Popular Criollismo, the gaucho was exalted as courageous, sober, a lover of freedom, a rebel, a patriot, and a fighter against social injustice. As the gaucho was disappearing from rural society due to new conceptions of land use, he reappeared as a symbol, as an archetype of nationality.

Adolfo Prieto (1988) develops in detail the ambiguous position held by the local elite, who, between 1880 and 1900, moved between fascination with and rejection of the advance of the new literary and artistic genre.<sup>10</sup> According to Prieto, Criollismo meant asserting legitimacy to dominant sectors, and a way of

rejecting the growing power that immigrants were achieving. Some figures of these sectors showed a remarkable fascination with Criollo drama due to the catharsis it generated through the fate of its gauchos subjected to injustice. In addition, the icons of the peasant landscape—the music, dance, and songs that were integrated into the performances of these dramas—were evaluated as the communicative codes of a new artistic genre that inspired nationalists' wishes to have an “authentic national theatre.” This new genre of performance, the Criollo Circus, was defended because it was popular and less elitist than the Europeanised cultural manifestations that dominated the legitimate art circles of the time.

If the fascination that caused the Criollismo was based on the hope of establishing national authenticity in the arts, its rejection came from intellectuals who argued that the Argentine art should be a child of European civilisation. The oscillation between approval and rejection of the elites against the consolidation of Criollismo began to lean toward disapproval by the turn of the twentieth century. Fearful of social conflicts that began to take hold in urban concentrations, and facing the potential danger of social disintegration, the ruling class started to evaluate as risky the development of a literature and an art whose central figure was a rebel gaucho. Thus, a real cultural policy program aimed at containing the spread of Popular Criollismo was launched.<sup>11</sup>



*Figure 1. Family Videla playing “Juan Moreira”  
Photograph from the personal files of the Videla Brothers*

By the mid-1920s, Argentinean arts would face a renewal inspired by the European avant-garde. Circus from this period enters a space of depreciation. Against the Europeanised hegemonic conception of classical art, circus was measured as a comparatively minor art. However, Circo Criollo, as the birthplace of the national theatre, would remain as a yardstick until today.

This 'minor art' that, with the coming of the new century, had to compete with the growth of the theatres and the weighting of Europeanised arts—and later with cinema, radio and television—continued to have wide acceptance with audiences during the first half of the twentieth century. Circuses Criollos were updating their repertoire with theatre pieces by Argentine authors covering all genres, from Criollismo to farce, comedy and drama. In the 1950s, throughout the height of the radio-theatre era, many Circo Criollo artists participated in the new artistic form, which inherited the itinerant performance patterns of the circus. In fact, at times of peak activity, the capacity of small theatres was not enough for the large audiences and radio-theatre companies joined circuses to present the second part in circus tents.<sup>12</sup>

By the mid-1960s, a period of decline in the popularity of circus began, related to the impossibility of maintaining its excessive business costs. While many circuses continued traveling long distances in the country, economic challenges led to the consequent decline in the number of circuses and the quality of the shows (fewer sets, costumes, and facilities). They had to abandon the second part theatre play, they faced legislative prohibitions that prevented the assembly of circus tents and the presence of animals in urban centres, they had to decrease the price of their tickets, and they faced a lower demand from the public. This process was not only experienced by national circuses in Argentina but also mirrored the international context for circuses. Primarily it meant that during the 1970s and until the mid-1980s, circus contracted and was poorly regarded in the field of performing arts.

### ***The 1980s - The democratic opening: the recovery of popular performance languages and the development of street arts***

During the early post-dictatorial years, Buenos Aires was full of a diverse range of street art initiatives that fused different popular artistic expressions related to local history. The "murgas" (a Río de la Plata style of carnival dance and music), the tango, the typical dramas from Circo Criollo, and circus techniques—among other popular performance languages—were taken up by artists who wanted to move away from commercial or high art, young performers eager to experiment with practices and spaces that had been forbidden during the dictatorial period. Even though the protagonists of these groups intersect, we can highlight some trends that developed in divergent lines at this time, and these can be taken into account as *background* when analysing new art initiatives of the 1980s and the resurgence of circus arts in the city.

Firstly, in the mid-1980s the Movement of Popular Theatre (MO.TE.PO) was formed, consisting of various artistic groups, among which were the theatre groups *Catalinas Sur*, *Calandracas*, the *Grupo Teatral Dorrego* and *Teatro de la Libertad*. These groups were characterised by activities that recovered artistic languages and characters of the vernacular tradition. Taking performance to the streets arose from an artistic impulse inspired by a certain conception of the popular, and a critical review of the injustices and atrocities of the recent military dictatorship. Young artists were committed to publicly denouncing the

ousted regime and reaching a potential audience that normally would not come to theatres. In the words of one of the most distinguished groups of the time:

We came from suffering the bloodiest dictatorship ... we were not accustomed to using public place. . . We were neighbourhood residents and. . . from 1983, found in the theatre, a way to communicate with other neighbours. We worked in the neighbourhood and we recognise ourselves as followers of the traditional art forms of this place that has been the birthplace of popular arts: the operetta and zarzuela (brought by Italian and Spanish); the Sainete (that mixture of Criollos and immigrants in the yard of the tenement); the Circus (where our national theatre was born); the murga and candombe.<sup>13</sup>

Following the proposal of Jorge Dubatti (2002), the post-dictatorship period was a time characterised by a “canon of multiplicity,” when artists were committed to freely seeking diverse materials from all instances of the past, even at the intersection with other art systems:

There is a turn to the past in various ways: for a rereading of different encoded traditions ... or to start new traditions from the revision or reorganisation of the materials of the past.<sup>14</sup>

New performance groups recovered circus as well as other local traditions and presented them in the public space, aiming to perform popular entertainment in the context of freedom in opposition to the previous period of dictatorship. To recover the style and scenic language of old Circo Criollo and pieces such as *Juan Moreira*, meant to denounce in the public square the atrocities committed in the recent past of state terrorism. To occupy public space, therefore, meant exercising freedoms of which citizens had been deprived.



Figure 2. Payaso Chacovachi in *CircoVachi, Summer Season, San Bernardo, 2003*. Photo: Julieta Infantino

Secondly, as a background to the reemergence of circus practices in the city, I will highlight some particular characters who were pioneers of this

resurgence and who were studying at the School of Mime, Pantomime and Cultural Expression of Angel Elizondo. The links between this school, the protagonists of Parakultural,<sup>15</sup> the Argentinean clown style and Cristina Moreira,<sup>16</sup> street circus and its precursor Chacovachi,<sup>17</sup> and Gerardo Hochman,<sup>18</sup> can be read as integrated links that over time would separate and open different paths of artistic activity. During these years Elizondo's School and the Parakultural experimental performance space nurtured these young students who were testing new possibilities to innovate in the arts. Humour, laughter, improvisation, collective creation, and the prominence of an active body on stage were expressive elements for artistic renewal chosen by these artists, whilst their collective and alternative ways of life repudiated the rigidity of the dictatorial period from which Argentina had recently emerged.

One of the central elements present in the narratives of artists of the time is related to the value of open learning spaces. In various narratives that I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>19</sup> artists describe their experience of the period as a "discovery of new worlds." Access to information through courses and workshops, and to performances by visiting international companies introduced local artists to new trends. Within the social climate of this epoch that valued freedom and participation in the public sphere, circus techniques emerged as the dominant vehicle for taking art into the streets, a choice associated with the idea of democratising the arts, with the recovery of vernacular traditions, and with the aim of reaching diverse audiences—particularly non-theatre going audiences.

In some aspects, the Argentinean experience in the 1980s mirrored the fortunes of circus internationally, where renovation of the form was not instigated by performers from the traditional circus sector but arose from the politically and socially engaged renovations of the performing arts occurring in the UK, the US, Canada and Ireland from the late 1960s onwards.<sup>20</sup> The ideals of popular arts that were politically and socially engaged found a strong connection to the local history of circus in Argentina. To enact *Juan Moreira* in a public square was to talk about injustice and a way to denounce the atrocities that occurred during the dictatorial years. To use physical skills, action, and parody typical of circus in the performance of *Juan Moreira* was a committed way of thinking about the social role of art and its ability to connect with virtually all social classes in the public square. Thus, the mixture of innovation, tradition, local and international practices was a distinctive aspect of circus renewal in Argentina.

While internationally there was little participation of the traditional family circus sector in the re-imagining of circus that occurred in the 1970s-1980s, in the Argentinean case there is a centrality of circus tradition through the foundation of the Circo Criollo School. Created and directed by the Videla brothers—artists from a third generation circus family who decided in 1982 to begin teaching circus disciplines—this was the first circus school in the country.<sup>21</sup> Oscar Videla remembered the early 1980s as follows:



We started to see that circuses had no more artists. The one who was lucky had gone abroad, to Europe or the US. That is why we decided to open the school to incorporate new blood.<sup>22</sup>

During the 1980s, the school could not find a fixed space. The Videllas worked in different places until, in the early 1990s, they settled in the Monserrat neighbourhood (in the centre of Buenos Aires) where they continue to work today. Even with these twists and turns, the school was “a success. . . it was like throwing a stone in the water and expanding our dream. People were eager to learn the techniques of circus, and nobody knew how to teach them,” remembered Oscar Videla. Thus, the Videla brothers became the undisputed forerunners of an artistic movement that redefined the circus arts, often granting them the prestigious recognition of being “the grandparents” of a new generation of artists. They are recognised as the ones who transgressed family and cultural mandates by encouraging innovative modes of transmission and reproduction of the circus arts. While the Circo Criollo School was intended to maintain local circus traditions, we will see that it played a central role in the generation of a particular street circus style typical of the 1990s to be discussed in the next section.



Figure 3. The Videla Brothers performing at the Cabaret of the 6th Convención Argentina de Circo, *Payasos y Espectáculos Callejeros*, 2001. Photo: Julieta Infantino

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, many of the artists who had appropriated public spaces for various forms of street arts took other directions, or specialised in particular trends. MO.TE.PO groups defined the now-called *Community Theatre*;<sup>23</sup> some of the performers of the Parakultural are currently recognised as actors in commercial settings and on television. The Videla Brothers and the Clown Chacovachi assumed important roles during the 1990s, defining a particular style of street circus performance that became the mark of the period.

Before examining the resurgence of circus arts during the 1990s when different circus styles were defined, we need to take into account some important facts about the post-dictatorial epoch, so as to enable an

understanding of a complex time that was full of expectation and fears that remained after the end of the dictatorship. As was stated by one of the artists of the time:

Believing that in the '80s the arrival of democracy was enough to instantly erase the stiffness and daily oppression of Argentine society would be to fall into childish simplifications. Corpses were still walking between us and the air was full of fear.<sup>24</sup>

While the 1980s were a time in which high expectations for socio-political change were debated with the restoration of democracy, this period cannot be analysed without acknowledging the marks left in society by Argentina's military dictatorship. Hence the emergence of new practices, relationships and meanings in theatre, circus, and street performance needs to be considered in the light of the specific context of "fear" and "expectations."

In this sense, the protagonists of the arts renewal were identified with an era in which values such as freedom, participation and transgression became real challenges. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>25</sup> the dictatorship had not only instilled fear and had removed spaces for experimentation and freedom, it had also virtually erased certain popular traditions due to their critical and subversive character. Therefore, the challenge seemed to be their recovery. In this retrieval of past practices, we can see that there was a manipulation of the traditional art form, as some aspects of the past became mixed with new trends.

The notion that tradition is a selective process in which social actors have agency to choose and reconstruct the past is a useful tool for analysing legitimisation processes that are not only a matter for formal institutions but also of cultural formations.<sup>26</sup> Williams deviates from the conception of domination as a unidirectional process; institutions are not an "organic hegemony," rather the hegemonic process is full of conflicts and contradictions. Therefore, hegemony is not reducible to the activities of "a state ideological apparatus" but rather a process of negotiations between institutions and formations.

Within the context of the immediate post-dictatorship period, the climate of freedom was undeniable, yet power circuits were still characterised by authoritarianism. To some extent cultural policies encouraged public participation and appreciation of popular forms that had been silenced and devalued during the military dictatorship, but young artists still faced strong opposition, fears, and limitations. Not without opposition, the Videla brothers, representatives of the circus family tradition, broke with those traditional forms of artistic production that had characterised the circus and opened the field by inviting "new blood" to learn what, until that moment, were "circus secrets." Not without difficulties, young artists of the time recovered an art that was formerly disparaged as 'low' and devalued by hegemonic standards of legitimacy. Not without opposition, art occupied public spaces, thus challenging the circulation circuits of 'high' and commercial arts. Recuperation and innovation were mixed together in a context of possibilities as well as limitations.

***The 1990s - The resurgence of circus arts in the city: “new” styles and the expanding of teaching spaces***

The early years of the 1990s saw the genesis of several styles or methods of doing circus: New Circus,<sup>27</sup> Street Circus, and Social Circus. There is a general consensus that Gerardo Hochman is an important local reference for the development of New Circus in Argentina. In the early 1990s he joined a group of artists that were already developing circus languages in Buenos Aires and created *La Trup*. After a considerable amount of training and experimentation, they released *Emociones simples*, the first Argentinean circus performance developed in a theatre with a troupe composed of artists who had learned circus techniques outside of family circus traditions. This event was an important precedent for the development of the *New Circus* style in Buenos Aires, alongside the opening of *La Arena School* in 1994, also directed by Hochman. However, during these years there was also a strong presence of what I have called Street Circus. It is a local way of doing circus characterised by the recovery of popular performance traditions dating back to the minstrels, the travelling comedians, and the fair and carnival artists. The use of these kinds of artistic languages, considered “popular” in the Bakhtinian sense, refers to those traditions.<sup>28</sup>



Figure 4. Drawing used in the “Convención Argentina de Circo, Payasos y Espectáculos Callejeros,” linking the actual practice to the tradition of popular arts in the public square.

Artists often assess the public space as an area that allows for greater public participation than is usual in conventional theatre. In the public square, artists recreate an environment in which the public do not pay an entrance fee and are permitted to play, shout and clap, while artists are allowed to criticise and laugh at the establishment. Argentinian Street Circus is threaded through with the notion that art is linked to transgression, liberation, and opposition to hegemonic art. Moreover, the artists themselves consider their performance to be a committed way of thinking about the role of art and the artist in society through the democratisation of access to the arts.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Street Circus should be thought of as a performance style deeply engrained with the particular

conception of the arts with which artists of the 1990s identified—art as a tool for social participation and transformation.

The process of artistic renewal, begun in the 1980s by the Videla brothers, was expanded during the 1990s. In the first half of the decade, new teaching spaces in the city of Buenos Aires were opened; earlier in this article I mentioned the opening of *La Arena School* in 1994, directed by Gerardo Hochman and now recognised as a school of the utmost artistic professionalism. During those years, the Integral Circus Workshops of *Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas* also began. This teaching space is now remembered as a place of cultural links between circus family traditions and new circus styles, as well as a congregation place for many artists involved in the renewal of circus through street arts in Buenos Aires.<sup>30</sup> In addition, Cultural Centres belonging to the City Government of Buenos Aires sporadically offered circus workshops and by the end of the decade were offering a broader and more sustained supply of such workshops.

This was also a period of discovery and experimentation with pedagogy, influenced by a significant commitment to creativity and the ability to bring material from other countries. An example of this is the formation of *Los Malabaristas del Apokalipsis* in 1994, a successful group of street jugglers, who, returning from a tour across various European countries, started performing in a central square of Buenos Aires city called Plaza Francia, with juggling sticks and monocycles brought from Europe. “A trio of jugglers as never seen in Buenos Aires streets. It was a success,” remembered Riki Ra, one of its members. Soon, they rented a house in the outskirts which became a meeting and artistic production location. The *Forte Garrizone* along with *Los Malabaristas del Apokalipsis* were responsible for a sort of explosion of jugglers in the second half of the 1990s and the entrenchment of a style with a local brand.<sup>31</sup> In artistic terms, they promulgated a renewal of circus arts with its own characteristics. Wielding a critical stance to the ‘old circus’ but also against the grain of New Circus, some of the Street Circus artists of the 1990s identified with a critical and transgressive speech at the artistic level, which merged with the concept of democratisation of art in the public space. Moreover, they proposed to turn art into their way of life and a professional project, fighting against the limited job opportunities offered to youth in the period.



Figure 6. Clipping from a booklet distributed at the street performance in Plaza Francia, 1990s.

The rejection of 'old circus' or New Circus was not a uniform trend in the field. The production of a circus show, *Tracción a cuerda* in 1995 that combined in a particular way the traditional circus with New Circus is remembered by artists as a landmark. Under the direction of Gabriela Ricardes and Mario Perez Ortaney, this important circus production was performed for several years, a show that crossed professional artists from the circus tradition with young artists formed in circus schools and cultural centres.

Another milestone for circus in the period occurred in 1996 when the clown Chacovachi, together with several artists recognised by this time as renovators of the circus genre, organised the first Argentinean Circus Convention. Conducted annually since 1996 up to the present, these meetings, involve a camp of 4-6 days duration with over 1000 circus artists from around the country and the world. The significance of these occasions has been analysed in other articles,<sup>32</sup> but it is essential to mention here that they developed as a very important teaching space, and a place where experimentation, knowledge sharing, and gathering together helped to develop the circus arts.<sup>33</sup>



Figure 7. Street Circus show in the 14th Argentinean Convention of Circus, Clown and Street arts, 2010. Photo: Julieta Infantino.

The events I have described here gave birth to a particular Street Circus style that possesses an Argentinean inflection yet in certain ways mirrors European versions of Street Circus. Local Street Circus performances share a similar structure, divided into the following parts: the *call*, when the artists develop various strategies to draw public attention; the *development* of the show with all kinds of circus skills, often involving a section with audience participation; the *hat*, when the audience is invited to pay for the show; and the *closing*, usually the performance of the best number.

Within this structure, the *hat* is the part with a particularly local 'brand'—it is managed differently to the European style of Street Circus, where a hat or bag is placed for viewers to give money as they consider appropriate. Instead, in the Argentinean style, this part of the performance is a key section of the show where artists make jokes with double meanings and try to educate the public to value street art as much as the mainstream art. Throughout most of the 1990s street art was considered a minor art, discredited and devalued, leading many artists to take advantage of this moment of the show to fight for its value. Another feature of the Argentinean Street Circus style is direct address to the audience in a critical or provocative style. The clown Chacovachi often described this feature with a personal anecdote:

In Spain my jokes are political about this relationship we have between the Third World and the First one. For example, I say, "Bring joy, take out the brush, take out the South American Indian you have inside ... the South American Indian you ate 500 years ago and return it to me." Or as I say at the beginning of the show: "Spaniards, Spanish, Franco died [referring to the former Spanish dictator]".

Direct communication with the public and comical critiques consolidated into the central elements of the Argentinean Street Circus style, thus identifying its artists as cultural workers struggling to revalue a discredited art and install alternative modes of social participation, working and living.

At the end of the previous section, I argued that the post-dictatorship 1980s were a time characterised by openness, freedom and experimentation, but with certain limitations. My study of the next decade shows that promotion of the values of the new democratic state and encouragement of citizen participation were quickly supplanted. The 1990s were marked by individualism, consumerism, privatisation of public spaces, retraction of the state as guarantor of rights, labour flexibility, and the installation of a neoliberal model that increasingly generated exclusion, poverty, and marginalisation.

As I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>34</sup> the neoliberal 1990s consolidated the experience of impoverishment in Argentinean society. Until this juncture, poverty in Argentina had been represented as a temporary situation—many poor could indeed imagine and expect social mobility. From the 1990s on, poverty became structural and social mobility was increasingly something to be only imagined. Within this context the preponderance of street performers who strongly identified themselves as cultural workers should be seen as an

alternative life and work strategy. Argentina was largely characterised by a meritocratic conception of development in which individual effort and investment into the future supposedly guaranteed social ascent. During the 1990s the possibilities for social mobility almost vanished. Many young people found that through sacrifice, effort and saving for the future, they would not achieve a better quality of life. They therefore identified with new and alternative forms of artistic production that enabled independence, autonomy, and ideological freedom from the status quo.

With the aim of democratising access to the arts, the appropriation of public spaces through artistic practice became identified with the new cultural formations I have been discussing. 'Taking arts to the streets' became a countercultural practice that challenged the entrenched hegemony of established arts practice whilst also recovering a reviled and discredited art. Street Circus became a tool for participation and commitment as well as an opening of autonomous and independent artistic and labour alternatives that challenged the increasingly precarious and unstable areas of employment offered to young people of the period.

Ideas of transgression and resistance emanating from the discourses and practices of the young circus artists with whom I worked, were introduced as the counter to hegemonic social representations that stigmatised "the youth of the 90s" and loaded them with negativity. Young people were socially represented as "dangerous" but also as disengaged, consumerist and apolitical. The empirical study I undertook allowed me to show that youth of the 1990s thought deeply about politics; they resisted modern 'political' institutions and they actively opened "new" spaces for political critique, characterised by links to expression, art and culture.

In Latin America, the concept and practice of Social Circus refers to the use of circus teaching as an intervention tool for working with vulnerable members of the population. With a strong background in Brazil and ideological links to popular conceptions of education, Social Circus is considered an effective strategy for promoting artistic and socio-productive opportunities with youth. It is also thought to enable autonomous and creative development of students, strengthen critical thinking, and open more equal opportunities for access to training and artistic production.

In Argentina, the first Social Circus initiatives occurred long before their methodological or pedagogical definitions which has in more recent times have been spread around the globe through the actions of Cirque du Monde (the philanthropic arm of Cirque du Soleil). By 1991, Mariana Rúfelo, a Street Circus artist, had started her first stilts workshop with children from a poor neighbourhood of the southern area of Buenos Aires. The results were very interesting and, together with several others, she opened new workshops in other neighbourhoods. By the mid-1990s, she and Pablo Holgado had established sustained teaching initiatives in community circus workshops for children and youth of socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods (slums) in Buenos Aires. In 2002 they became an NGO and since then, together with professionals of other

social and artistic disciplines, they have generated a significant growth in Social Circus activity, seen in the number of teaching spaces they have opened and in their teaching methodology. Together with members of the FIC (Ibero- American Federation of Circus), they have benchmarked these strategies for social transformation through art in Latin America.<sup>35</sup>



*Figure 8. Three images from the early community art workshops of Circo Social del Sur from the mid-1990s to the premiere of Salto, a show performed by graduates of the organisation in 2011. Photos: personal archive of Circo Social del Sur and Diego Izquierdo.*

It is no coincidence that strategies for social transformation through Social Circus emerged almost simultaneously during the 1990s in different Latin American countries.<sup>36</sup> It was the neoliberal decade par excellence, it was the post 'Washington Consensus' period in which various international agencies were meeting the need to reduce state functions, transferring state obligations to the private sector or to civil society. Moreover, it was the decade that socially punished the most neglected sectors, such as the younger generations. We can think on the causes of the emergence of this kind of arts transformation by returning to Williams' notion of hegemony as a process which must be continually renewed, recreated, defended and modified, but which is also continually resisted, limited, altered and challenged.<sup>37</sup> "It was a time when you faced so much inequality that you felt something had to be done. And I had my stilts and my traps. So I started my first workshops wanting to change something from what I knew," remembers Mariana Rúfelo of her beginnings in Social Circus practice.

Many young artists active in the renewal of the circus genre found in Social Circus an innovative way to combine their artistic interests with their desire to transform inequalities and social problems affecting different social sectors, especially disadvantaged children and young people. As Circo Social del Sur argues:

We intend to confront the problem of exclusion of certain sectors of society that are often pushed to a relegated cultural life. We bet even more: not only we intend to guarantee access to cultural goods and services but also to the right to produce art in social sectors that otherwise would not have access to it, on an equal standard of opportunities. In this sense, we do not appeal to youth as beneficiaries of social assistance, but rather as producers and actors in artistic events, as creative subjects.<sup>38</sup>



This focus on transforming unequal access to opportunities for artistic creation is exemplified by the production process for a show by young students of Circo Social del Sur. In group chats undertaken as part of the creative process, young people discussed the way in which they are represented disparagingly as poor and slum youth. They argued that the shantytown used to be viewed as something dark, grey, synonymous with danger, whereas they saw it as a landscape full of lights, which connoted its thousands of inhabitants that deviated from these stigmatising stereotypes. Eventually, this idea was reflected in the production by a poem by Eduardo Galeano that tells how a man could go to heaven and observe human life from above. There he saw that we are a lot of people, a sea of little fires where each person shines among all the others. According to these young artists, the opportunity to express this “other” look on young people of the slums was an artistic way to transform the view that society has of part of itself. The commitment to social transformation, criticism and resistance through these sorts of artistic initiatives has typified local circus practices.

By the end of the 1990s there was an opening of new possibilities for artistic and labour development as circus artists began to work on different projects such as business events, companies’ promotions, and parties. This expanded demand for the circus arts in the city consequently changed their valorisation, ushering in what I characterise as the contemporary period when circus has a relatively important presence on legitimate art circuits.<sup>39</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In this article I have presented a synopsis of key aspects of the history of the resurgence of circus arts in Buenos Aires. Beginning with analysis of the wider past in which these arts had an ephemeral valorisation before contracting and becoming devalued, I have examined the way these arts were recovered by young artists in the post-dictatorial period of the 1980s when the country was experiencing a democratic opening after one of the most heinous times in Argentina's history. Surveying some key events and key characters in the recovery of these arts, I have analysed the 1980s as characterised by experimentation, freedom and limits. The decade functioned as an important precedent for the revival of circus arts in Buenos Aires during the 1990s. Democratisation of the arts through the recovery of a devalued practice, its enactment in street space, and through proposals of art as social transformation took place in the context of a neoliberal era in which artistic practice was promoted to “the youth of the ‘90s” as an alternative way of life.

This article shows moreover how valorisations of the arts are constructed and modified according to diverse epochs and interests. Similar to what I proposed for the historical period of ephemeral valorisation of Circo Criollo in the late-nineteenth century, I have discussed how a popular art form that was in a process of contraction was recovered and redefined by new social actors. My analysis demonstrates the utility of an approach to studying artistic genres as manipulable areas. In this sense, I have argued the importance of working with these social processes from the concept of traditionalisation.<sup>40</sup> From this

perspective, tradition is not an inert historical segment, anchored in the past; it is rather an active selection process. It is from the present that the past is actively constructed by selecting certain meanings and practices while others are excluded.<sup>41</sup> These theoretical proposals allow analysis of changing valuations of arts immersed in time contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1999 I began to investigate the case of circus arts in the city of Buenos Aires. Throughout nearly 15 years of anthropological research I conducted interviews with leading figures from the local circus and undertook field observations in various spaces such as meetings, festivals, shows, and teaching areas. I also collaborated with different groups of artists in the promotion of circus arts in the country. The history presented here in summary was developed in my PhD thesis in Anthropology entitled "*Cultura, Jóvenes y Políticas en disputa. Prácticas circenses en la ciudad de Buenos Aires*," PhD diss. Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2012. I am immensely grateful to each one of the artists who shared their trajectories, which I quilt together to tell this history.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, *Cultura: Sociología de la comunicación y el arte* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, "Género, Intertextualidad y Poder Social," *Revista de Investigaciones Folklóricas* 11 (1996): 78-108.

<sup>4</sup> Julieta Infantino, "El circo de Buenos Aires y sus prácticas: definiciones en disputa," *ILHA. Revista de Antropología* (2013<sup>a</sup>): 277-309.

<sup>5</sup> Raúl Castagnino, *El Circo Criollo* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Lajouane, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Adolfo Prieto, *El discurso criollista en la formación de la Argentina moderna* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Beatriz Seibel, *Historia del Circo, Biblioteca de Cultura Popular 18* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Sol, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> To delve deeper into the specifics of Brazilian circus-theater see Erminia Silva, *Circo-teatro. Benjamin de Oliveira e a teatralidade circense no Brasil* (Sao Paulo: Altana, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Marta Blache, "Folklore y nacionalismo en la Argentina. Su vinculación de origen y su desvinculación actual," en *Runa. Archivos para las Ciencias del Hombre*, vol XX (Buenos Aires: FFyL, UBA, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Adolfo Prieto, *El discurso criollista*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Beatriz Seibel, "*El circo-teatro. Un discurso teatral no integrado en la historia del teatro latinoamericano*," paper presented at IV Encuentro Internacional del IITCTL, México, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> "*Grupo de Teatro Catalina Sur*" accessed 18 February, 2013: <http://www.catalinasur.com.ar>

<sup>14</sup> Dubatti, Jorge. "Micropoéticas. Teatro y subjetividad en la escena de Buenos Aires (1983-2001). Introducción", in *El nuevo teatro de Buenos Aires en la postdictadura (1983-2001). Micropoéticas I*, 3- 72. Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural de la Cooperación, (2002), 30.

<sup>15</sup> It is considered one of the main references of the so-called "under" theatre of the 80s, a space for cultural experimentation through which different recognised artists and groups passed.

<sup>16</sup> Many of the local artists consider Cristina Moreira as the mother of contemporary Argentinean clown. "The courses delivered since 1983, based on the teaching method of the French Jacques Lecoq and Philippe Gaulier, operated as a fertile hotbed of comedic actors and would eventually become, over the years, a nearly mythical founding scene of Argentinean clown." Javier Flores and Jerónimo Ledesma, "La Moreira," in *Bondiola. Clown Argentino contemporáneo 1983-2003* (2006), accessed October 10, 2009, [www.clownargentinocontemporaneo.blogspot.com](http://www.clownargentinocontemporaneo.blogspot.com)

<sup>17</sup> Chacovachi, the Third World Clown as he calls himself, is a renowned street clown who began working through street arts in Buenos Aires in the early 1980s and became an undisputed reference for Street Circus, a style that came to the fore during the 1990s.

<sup>18</sup> Gerardo Hochman is an artist who began experimenting with circus languages in the 1980s when he was a young student in Elizondo's school. At the end of the decade he completed his training at the National School of Circus of Cuba. Today he is considered not only a leader of the renewal of circus arts in the country but also a great teacher.

<sup>19</sup> Julieta Infantino and Hernán Morel, “*De milongueros, cirqueros y murgueros. Los “precursores” del resurgimiento actual en Buenos Aires*,” paper presented at 29<sup>a</sup> Reunión Brasileña de Antropología, ABA, Natal/RN, Brasil, 3-6 August, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Gillian Arrighi, “Towards a cultural history of community circus in Australia,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 64 (April 2014): 199-222.

<sup>21</sup> Until that moment the circus arts were an exclusive knowledge reserved, according to tradition, for the members of the family circus group.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Oscar Videla, 9 December, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> A theatre created by neighbours—amateur actors—who make plays that retrieve historically devalued popular practices, often disputing the official version of the history of Argentina. For more information see Marcela Bidegain, *Teatro comunitario: resistencia y transformación social* (Buenos Aires: Atuel, 2007); Edith Scher, *Teatro de vecinos de la comunidad para la comunidad*, 1a ed. (Buenos Aires: Argentores, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Alejandro Urdapilleta, ‘Prologue,’ in María José Gabin, *Las indepilables del Parakultural. Biografía no autorizada de Gambas al Ajillo* (Buenos Aires: Ed Libros del Rojas, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Julieta Infantino and Hernán Morel, “*De milongueros, cirqueros y murgueros.*”

<sup>26</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxismo y Literatura* (Barcelona: Península, 1977).

<sup>27</sup> Generic style or historical variant that emerged at the international level in the 1970s-1980s, the main exponent is Cirque du Soleil of Canada. The New Circus abandons certain characteristic elements of the traditional circus such as live animals and the presenter or ringmaster. Using body language almost exclusively it merges with other arts and often incorporates a general argument throughout the show.

<sup>28</sup> Here I refer to Mikhail Bakhtin’s approach to popular culture as a culture of subversion and opposition to ‘official culture,’ typified by medieval carnivals and performances of popular shows. Mijail Bakhtin, *La cultura popular en la Edad Media y en el Renacimiento. El contexto de Francois Rabelais* (Madrid: Alianza, 1985).

<sup>29</sup> Julieta Infantino, “El circo de Buenos Aires y sus prácticas: definiciones en disputa,” *ILHA. Revista de Antropología* (2013): 277-309.

<sup>30</sup> Los Talleres Integrales del Rojas were teaching workshops of different circus techniques (clown, aerial disciplines, acrobatics, juggling) conducted by Chacovachi and Mariana Sanchez, both protagonists of Street Circus, and Mario Perez Ortaney and Pablitén (Paul Rutkus), artists from many family generations of circus artists.

<sup>31</sup> Diego Altabás, “Variedades y circo porteño,” *Revista Picadero* Año 3, Número 9 (2003): 44-47, accessed 14 February, 2011, [www.inteatro.gov.ar/editorial/picadero09.php](http://www.inteatro.gov.ar/editorial/picadero09.php)

<sup>32</sup> Julieta Infantino, “Convención Argentina de Malabares, Circo y Espectáculos Callejeros: Performance Cultural, Tradicionalización e Identidad,” in Patrimonio, *Políticas Culturales y Participación Ciudadana*, ed. Carolina Crespo, Flora Losada and Alicia Martín (Buenos Aires: Antropofagia, 2007), 177-197.

<sup>33</sup> For more information about the Convención Argentina de Circo, Payasos y Espectáculos Callejeros see: <http://www.convencionargentina.com>, accessed 10 February, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Julieta Infantino, “Trabajar como artista. Estrategias, prácticas y representaciones del trabajo artístico entre jóvenes artistas circenses,” *Cuadernos de Antropología Social* 34 (2011): 141-163; Julieta Infantino, “La cuestión generacional desde un abordaje etnográfico. Jóvenes artistas circenses en Buenos Aires,” *Revista Última Década* (2013b): 87-113.

<sup>35</sup> The FIC consists of the following organisations: Social Circo del Sur (Argentina), Carampa School (Spain), Circolombia (Colombia), Crecer e Viver (Brazil), La Tarumba (Peru), Circo del Mundo (Chile), Chapito (Portugal). For more information on Circo Social del Sur see: <http://www.circosocialdelsur.org.ar/>

<sup>36</sup> The beginnings of Social Circus in Latin America are usually linked to the activities of Se Essa Rua Fosse Minha, an organisation that started to work with youth living in the streets of Rio de Janeiro in 1991. This experience was a model for the creation of Cirque du Monde (the social arm of Cirque du Soleil) that by 1995 adopted the concept of Social Circus and expanded its activities around the world. See [http://www.seessarua.org.br/circo\\_social.php](http://www.seessarua.org.br/circo_social.php), accessed 10 December, 2014. However, there are simultaneous beginnings in Argentina, Peru, Colombia, and Chile. Some of these social circus activities shared connections while others emerged in the context of social inequalities characterising the region.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, *Marxismo y Literatura*.

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<sup>38</sup> Marina Rúfelo, Pablo Holgado, Natalia Lázzaro and Vanesa Zambrano, “*Circo Social del Sur. Arte, Educación y Transformación Social. Carpeta Institucional, 2013*,” internal document created by Circo del Sur.

<sup>39</sup> On the contemporaneity of circus in Buenos Aires see: Julieta Infantino, “Procesos de organización colectiva y disputa política en el arte circense en la ciudad de Buenos Aires,” in *La política cultural en debate. Diversidad, performance y patrimonio cultural*, eds. Carolina Crespo, Hernán Morel and Margarita Ondelj (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Ciccus), [in press].

<sup>40</sup> Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, “*Género, Intertextualidad y Poder Social*.”

<sup>41</sup> Williams, *Marxismo y Literatura*.