

ISSUE 3

# WRITING THE CIRCUS



STRANGE WONDERFUL CREATURE

# INTRODUCTION

THIS PAST WINTER, I FINISHED WRITING AND PUBLISHING MY FIRST LONG-FORM BOOK OF PHOTOGRAPHIC AND WRITTEN ESSAYS –

*SLOW CIRCUS: VACUUM.* I SET OUT TO WRITE *SLOW CIRCUS* FOR MANY REASONS. WE WERE (ARE) IN THE MIDDLE OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC WITH NO LIVE PERFORMANCES POSSIBLE. I WANTED THE OPPORTUNITY TO RECTIFY A RATHER UNPLEASANT, DEGRADING EXPERIENCE SHARING THE ACT LIVE ON *DAS SUPERTALENT* & ACTUALLY SHARE ALL THE COOL THINGS THIS ACT IS ABOUT. AND BECAUSE THE VACUUM ACT WAS CREATED THANKS TO FUNDING FROM THE CANADA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS, I THOUGHT IT A SHAME THAT THE ARTISTIC QUESTIONS & THEORIES I LAID OUT IN THE APPLICATION ESSAYS THAT WON ME THE GRANT WOULD REMAIN KNOWN TO ONLY THE 6 OR 8 JURORS & EVALUATORS THAT JUDGE THESE SORTS OF THINGS. THE PROJECT WAS ALSO, FROM THE START, CONCEIVED OF AS AN ART OBJECT; I WANTED TO CREATE SOMETHING THAT WAS BEAUTIFUL TO HOLD, BEAUTIFUL TO LOOK AT AT, SOMETHING TO CHERISH AND DISPLAY. THAT MEANT THE PRICE TAG OF THAT BOOK WAS 7X GREATER THAN THAT OF THE ZINE YOU'RE HOLDING (GIVE OR TAKE).

OVER THE COURSE OF WRITING THAT COLLECTION, MANY CONVERSATIONS AROUND VACUUM WERE SET ASIDE, MOTHBALLED FOR UNKNOWN FUTURE PROJECTS, THANKS TO THE VILLAINOUS RESTRICTIONS OF PAGE LIMITS CURTAILING MY RAMBLING THOUGHTS (I HAD TO KEEP IT TO 50 OR SO PAGES FOR THE PROJECT TO BE EVEN REMOTELY AFFORDABLE / STAY UNDER \$100 PER BOOK). I ENDED UP CURATING *SLOW CIRCUS* TO CONTAIN ESSAYS AND DISCUSSIONS PERTAINING TO THE CREATION AND RESEARCH OF THE ACT.

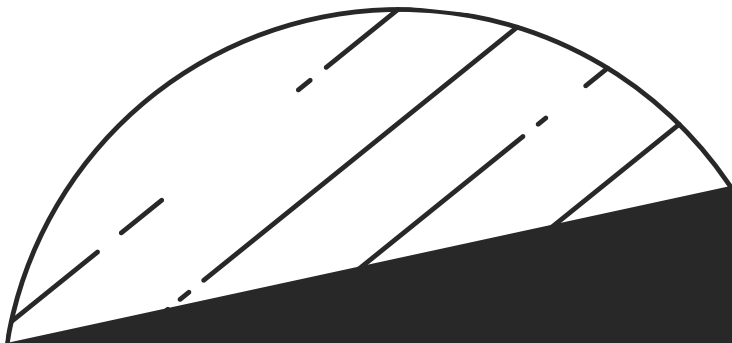
BUT OTHER LENSES STILL REMAIN THROUGH WHICH WE CAN LOOK AT VACUUM. THIS ISSUE OF WRITING THE CIRCUS IS A COLLECTION OF SMALL OFFERINGS THAT EMERGE FROM WHEN VACUUM WAS PERFORMED LIVE, OR SHARED WITH THE PUBLIC IN NON-LIVE WAYS. AND EVEN IF NICHE, LATEX-WRAPPED, CLAUSTROPHOBIA-INDUCING CONTORTION ACTS AREN'T YOUR THING, WE CAN STILL THINK ABOUT THESE CONCEPTS AND CONVERSATIONS IN RELATION TO OTHER CIRCUS DISCIPLINES, OTHER ACTS, OTHER ART FORMS. •

# BREATHE



The world shrinks to a small rectangle of soft, golden light. The latex billows slightly, hanging relaxed on the tower frame; a prism of filtered sunbeams. The dull roar of the vacuums fill the air with a thick wall of sound as they begin to draw air out of the volume. I stand, breathing quietly, suspended in the potential of the space. Inhale. The salt of sweat. The faint traces of chemicals from chlorination. The natural rubber smell of the latex itself. Exhale. Inhale. Knowing that the air will be gone soon. Exhale. Knowing that I'm adding just that tiny bit more CO<sub>2</sub> to the space. Inhale. The walls slowly start closing in, taking on tension and shine as they balloon inwards towards me from all sides: above, below, and around.

**Exhale.** I clamp the breathing tube between my teeth, the silky powdered smoothness of the latex beginning to press against my skin. I lose sight of my lower body, legs and hips consumed by the tower as I arch my neck backwards. I will my breath to remain slow, steady, even. **Inhale.** Only small pockets of air are left around my face, my hands, my chest – and they're rapidly shrinking. My heart rate rises in response, the external tension of the tower translating inescapably to the space inside my rib cage.



**Exhale.** The smallest pocket of air remains around my face now, distorting my features. My face is slowly distorted by the tightening latex: mashing my nose flat, crushing my cheekbones, drawing my mouth wide, twisting my brows. Graceful. Disturbing. Predictable. Unpredictable. Beautiful. Gross. The latex tries to wrestle the tube from between my teeth; I bite down harder; inhale the last sip of oxygen through my nose in one long, calm draw as the vacuum shifts up to the slightly higher pitch that tells me it's labouring to draw that final few gulps of air out of the volume, and then -

I take a long, calm inhale around the tube, equalize my ears, close my eyes, and wait. The latex closes in firmly around me, a caress, turning into a hug, turning into a squeeze. The mounting pressure quickens my pulse, tightens my thoughts into shorter and shorter loops. A moment of dread - my brain, calm and collected thus far - suddenly shrills that there's no way this is tolerable, survivable, that when this latex finally closes in I'll simply -

And then it's done. The pressure reaches its maximum: I am a bug trapped in amber. An odd oasis of calm settles over me as I give myself over to a moment that is void of everything except simply existing, entrapped, waiting, trusting that eventually it will end. All thoughts erased. Time stretches out and suspends, immeasurably, until -

*Ahhhhhh.* The vacuum shuts off; a GASP of air rushes back into the volume. The faintest stirrings of my limbs are once again possible. And time resets.

# VACUUM: 2020

VACUUM is a solo contortion act I researched & created in Winter 2019/2020. The act takes place inside a specially modified vacuum tower: a latex envelope encases a tall rectangular structure built from PVC tubing; vacuums are hooked up to the tubing structure and turned on to rapidly remove all air from the volume; this draws the latex in tightly on itself towards the centre of the prism; with me inside it, I am completely immobilized and without oxygen for several long seconds until the technician operating the vacuums at the back of the tower vents air back in, and the cycle begins again.

Circus artists tread the fine line between what we consider un/acceptable risk all the time though - and we do it for people's entertainment. Contortion is often considered the 'boring' act in a circus or cabaret because it's slow, doesn't take up space the way aerial or acrobatics does, and doesn't communicate risk to that performer's person, to the audience.

Even to a viewer who has never seen a vacuum device before, VACUUM immediately confers a visceral understanding to a viewer that this is a risky environment: there's no air, repeatedly. It was an act with no small amount of risk associated with its research and performance. People can and have died using such devices in the past without proper experience or supervision. No one has (been stupid enough to) designed a contortion routine to take place inside. It is, to put it lightly, a hostile physical environment.

Amongst other things, VACUUM was a way to question how we experience or intuitively interpret a performance when we are not certain of the gender of the performer. The apparatus itself obscures my form enough that viewers in live performance contexts have instinctively used that notorious, hotly-contested-for-use-in-the-singular-sense pronoun - they - when exclaiming about something in relation to the act ("OH MY GOD HOW ARE THEY BREATHING IN THERE"). I've heard 'he', and I've heard 'she' used as well. It's really quite a mixed bag; which is to say - people simply don't know.

.....

**JEN**

I've never thought about the fact that VACUUM is an act I don't like.

**ESS**

Oh yeah?

**JEN**

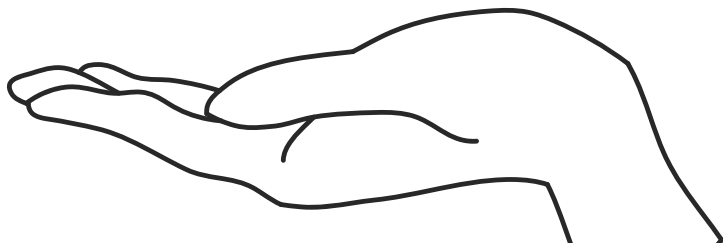
It's polarizing. I know I wouldn't enjoy watching you do it live. And the only reason I think I can say that to you out loud is because all of the reasons that I don't like the act are the objectives that you set out to accomplish in the creation of the act.

**ESS**

\*giggles\* You mean it's disturbing but that's the point?

**JEN**

Yeah!... WHICH I HATE .. And all of those reasons are intimately linked to your safety and wellbeing. There's no way to be your friend, fully understand the act, and love the act.



# STARING





VACUUM visually reminds us of many things: a cage that once displayed a circus animal; a box containing an automaton; a window-frame for a dancing woman; a pod for a science-fiction embryonic human in stasis; a taxidermy display for an abnormal creature. The literal frame of the apparatus used in VACUUM reinforces and focuses the 'right to stare' that is what gave rise to the heyday of freakshow and sideshow at the turn of the 20th century.



In Carrie Sandahl's work on sideshow, she argues that the powerful, instinctive responses a spectator has while watching a circus artist perform their act raises that spectator's awareness of their own physical, material body. The popularity of freakshow and sideshow was rooted in a similar impulse – an opportunity to stare at a body different than yours and take your measure of that abnormalcy (a move that simultaneously confers your own normalcy).

Watching VACUUM makes the spectator think about their body; how they would feel inside the tower. Our physical bodies are fragile, unpredictable, fallible, breakable things. When we see others doing extreme things with – or to – their bodies, we're interested. Sometimes, we're even captivated. We are vividly reminded of our own mortality, our own fragility.

VACUUM is a polarizing act. People who like the act really enjoy it; people who dislike it strongly dislike it. It makes them uncomfortable. It scares them. It reminds them of their own fears. It also disrupts the 'script' of a traditional circus act in a way that might mimic it just enough to be familiar, while still feeling wrong.

Things that are familiar yet 'wrong' are disturbing to us. Think of the 'uncanny valley': a (theoretical) measurement between the degree to which something resembles a human being, and the emotional response to that object. The phrase was coined to describe the phenomenon of how humans like robots that look more and more like humans ... but only up until a certain point. We have an affinity for robots that look like us, but if they look too much like us (and we still maintain the knowledge that what we are looking at is a robot, and not human), we get really creeped out.

Of the many ways we can make sense of a choreography involving circus bodies, time is an important component in how we enjoy and take in a circus act. Think about how important and iconic 'the pause' is, in a traditional circus act: there is a moment where the performer stops what they are doing for a moment (or holds the pose or trick) and waits for the audience to acknowledge their effort with applause.

It offers the audience a break from the excitement and (good or bad) stress of watching the acrobat perform death-defying feats; it offers the audience relief and an ability to connect and show their appreciation for the acrobat's skill and daring. VACUUM has pauses too – but they're upsetting ones.

The 'pause' in VACUUM is one in which I am forcibly held in an extreme position of flexibility. The audience must wait with me, while I am frozen in position. It's reminiscent of the 'pause' in which one should ask for applause, but I cannot turn to the audience, acknowledge their presence, and seek their approval. Therefore this 'pause' is not interpreted as an 'ask'. The 'pause' keeps you stuck in what feels like an endlessly breathless moment with me, and is therefore often met with horror, or anxiety.

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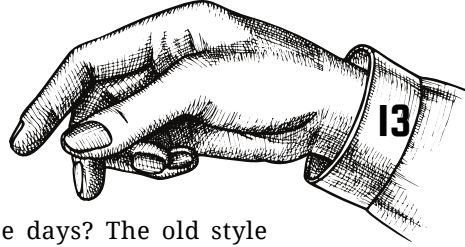
# MODERN FREAKSHOW



Circus, as we have come to know it through the context of P.T. Barnum and the way he shaped the development of the art form in North America through the 20th century, has always concerned itself with which bodies fall within the bounds of normalcy, and which bodies exist on the margins of exceptional – both superhuman, and deviant. We need look no further for examples of this than the intense popularity of the sideshow and freakshow in the late 19th/early 20th century, or the obsession with gender-bent androgynous aerialist in the early 1900s.

Freaks were displayed during the Golden Age of circus as a kind of edu-tainment. Showmen and sideshow managers espoused their exhibits as good, clean fun for the family, enshrining some of the most pseudoscientific and eugenic ideas of the time. Bodies that did not fit contemporary notions of whiteness, able-bodied or able-mindedness, or gender were displayed as uncivilized or even inhuman Others. The Golden Age of freakshow and sideshow was the late 19th and early 20th century. By the mid 1900s, the drive to stare unabashedly at bodies different from one's own had faded under the new, harsh light of medicine. We sought to cure and treat, rather than display. Amongst other things, we do not display humans in cages next to animals any longer. But the true heart of sideshow and freakshow lives on: freaks reassure the onlooking audience of their sameness, their oneness, and their claim to normalcy.

The need to look, to watch, isn't gone though. We see fragmented remnants littered everywhere throughout our lives, tiny prisms refracting our own lives back at us in a thousand little pieces in the social media feeds we scroll through, the reality TV shows we tune in to, the personal blogs and podcasts we consume, and more. We watch to be entertained, yes. We watch to be taken away from our own lives and problems, or to gain perspective on our own lives and problems. But we also watch to reassure ourselves: reassure ourselves that there are Other People out there 'making it' in myriad ways, and we might 'make it' too; or reassure ourselves that Other People are out there living their lives in ways we find asinine, hollow, or shallow.

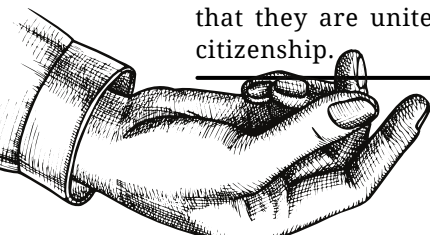


So where is the freakshow these days? The old style may have fallen to the wayside, but I'd say there's a strong argument that we've taken our new technologies, reinvented the concept, and slapped new labels on an old phenomenon. One of the clearest-cut places this need still shines through is in the TV talent show – something many circus artists working on the international performance circuit are familiar with.

Freakshows were populated by performers with born or acquired features or abilities that go beyond what is accepted by the general public as 'normal', in a positive way (a beautiful singer) or a negative way ('freaks', born or made). They were a form of entertainment masked as a kind of educational experience to target a middle class audience while maintaining a facade of civility and propriety, operating with a sideshow manager of some kind functioning as an anchor or guide for the audience's consumption of the performances while also offering sensationalized context and backstories on the scientific or artistic or medical marvels waiting beyond the canvas or curtain.

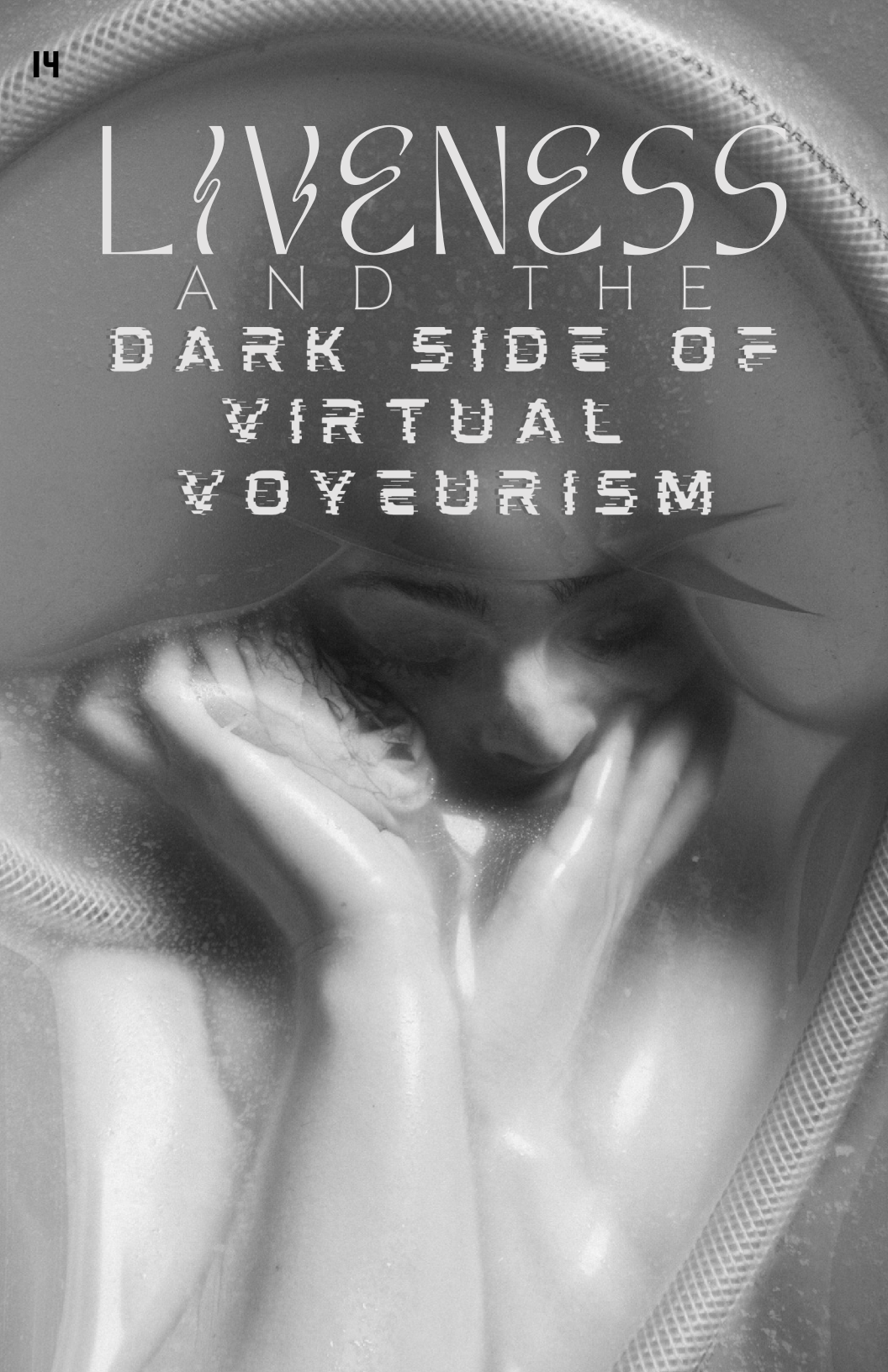
A TV talent show operates under an amusingly similar structure: a middle class audience is shepherded through a series of acts with 'judges' (authorities) on the matter present. The gathered jury functions as the thin veneer of authority in the context of a televised talent show, the contemporary version of the sideshow barker or self-styled impresario ushering rubes into the sideshow tent. They pass judgment on both the performer and the act, recreating the age-old purpose of the freak show: drawing lines that differentiate between me and them; to reassure the onlooking audience of their sameness, their oneness, their claim to normalcy; freaks reassure the public that they are united as a whole in their humanity & citizenship.

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# LIVENESS

AND THE  
DARK SIDE OF  
VIRTUAL  
VOYEURISM



“

“I’ve seen this on pornhub.”

“I’ve seen something like this on ...”

“I saw a video of a girl dying in one of these”

”

Much of what I’ve written about online and in SLOW CIRCUS in relation to VACUUM has to do with what happens when someone is watching the act live and in person. But there’s much to be gleaned from observing the public sphere in which others experience VACUUM, outside of the context of live performance. The original act teaser itself is nearing 2 million views on YouTube, and several short clips of the rehearsal process for the act on another popular platform are all over 1 million views each. All of the above are common messages on the short fifteen second clips of VACUUM that have gone viral on TikTok.

On social media, we craft our own narratives and display them for others to enjoy (or critique). We post photos and videos of our past and present selves, allowing others into our lives, and actively participating in theirs by consuming the photo and video narratives that they choose to share in return. It can generate empathy, community, connectivity. But the lack of liveness in this medium of gazing, looking, watching, can disrupt these more positive things quite quickly. It’s easy to forget that we’re looking at real humans, with failures and hubris and ugly truths, when all we see are the wins - with a skin-perfecting filter usually in place, to boot.

VACUUM was designed to be something that created an immediate understanding of the presence of risk in the contortion act for the viewer. I was not naive about how the nature of latex as a material (all distinguishing features - skin tone, body contours, hair - are cloaked and distorted in tight-fitting rubber; latex can create the effect of a literal object-ification), the original BDSM-context of a vacuum tower, and the way contortion is often fetishized in a Western context (Toepfer) might change how people interpret or experience the act. To the contrary, I was curious about how this might play out with a live audience.



These two particular points of curiosity during my research and creation – **How, and in what ways, might an audience associate a neutral choreography and a performer of indeterminate gender, with fetish and sexualization ... or not?**; and, **What sorts of effects will the objectifying properties of latex have in terms of the way a viewer feels or thinks about the act?** – are fascinating questions, in theory. But I did not expect in any way the manner in which answers to these questions played out publicly online.

Like so many things on social media, people's reaction and comments were magnified to an extreme end of the spectrum. People say things online that they'd never say in person because the immediate consequences of confrontation that might occur in a live interaction are absent.

**"I hope she walks away"** is a particularly telling comment: sadism is much easier to express when we no longer associate humanity or subjectivity with someone. Performing encased in latex, there's an external confirmation in these comments that on some level I've successfully removed myself enough stages away from a living being that I'm someone – or something – easier to think of as without agency, at the mercy of a subject with agency, an object utilized by other subjects. The degree and frequency of strangers online expressing excitement towards a notion of control that degrades quickly into a violent expression (of sex or death) is a clear indicator of the ways that the VACUUM act results in a shift from myself as a subject, as performer, to an object, encased in latex.

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"You're going to die in there"

"How to suffocate to death."

"I hope she [my technician, Miranda] walks away"

”

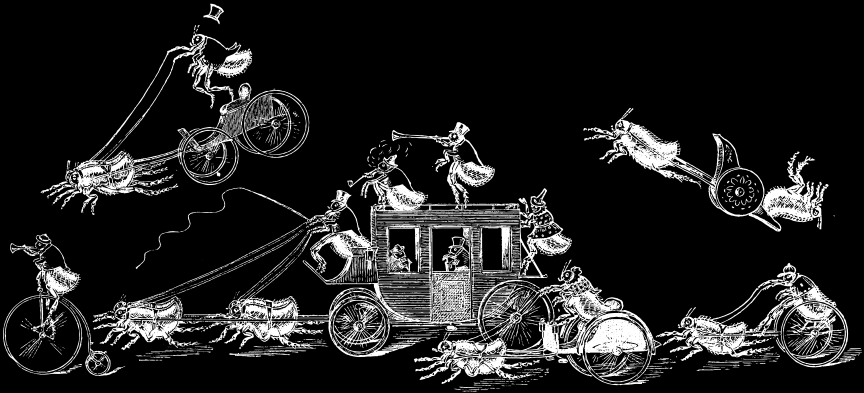




A scholar named Erin Hurley writes that “all circus bodies are stained with the residue of the sideshow freak body”, and distinguishes between the “born freak” and the “made freak”. She also classifies things as a ‘faked freak’ when elements of the act (props, illusions, costume, makeup, etc) create a ‘simulation of natural exceptionality” (Hurley 2016: 134). The kind of ‘born freaks’ that Hurley is talking about would be a category of performers who have a visible physical difference from the general sideshow-going public – missing limbs, very short or very tall stature, intersex, etc.

A ‘made freak’ would be something like a ‘half-and-half’ performer (usually a male performer in costume to appear that half of his body is female), someone who eats glass or pierces their body, etc.

Hurley goes on to say, “with the contortionist, the connection to freaks, particularly ‘born freaks,’ intensifies. . . . The contortionist . . . is naturally physically prodigious, even if this prodigality is not quite so immediately [ cont]



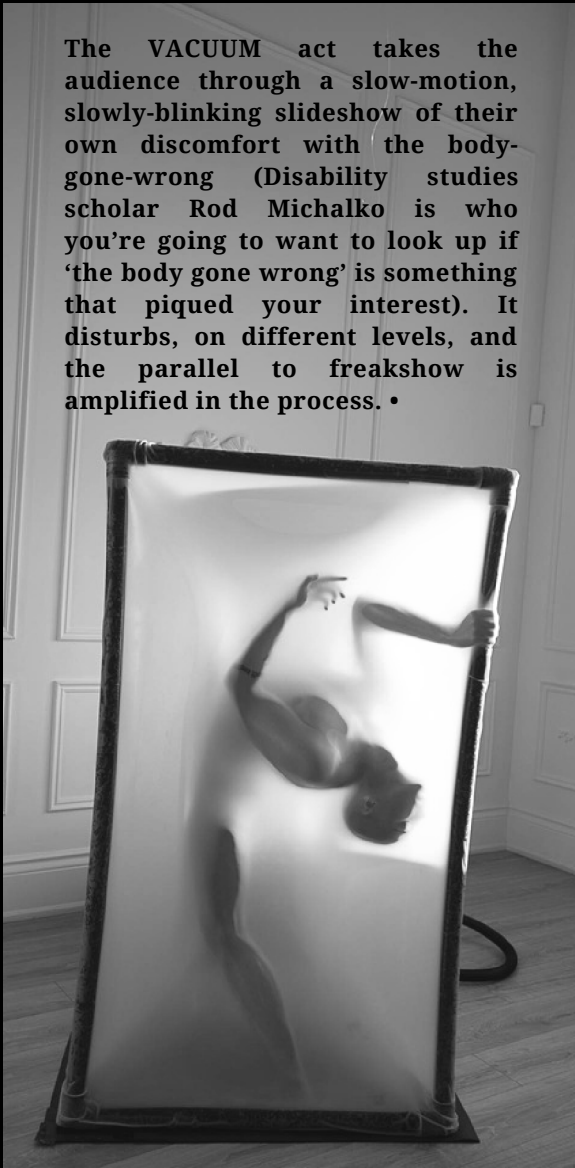
visible as the born freak's" (134). In the heyday of sideshow and freakshow, contortionists were billed as 'rubber people', as born without bones, as 'human elastic bands': people whose bodies naturally did strange and impossible-seeming movements. However, this is the story that would need to be sold, to maintain the myth of rarity, abnormalcy, difference ... and marketability.

There are many contortionists who can accomplish stunning feats of flexibility with little to no training, and little to no warm-up. But there are just as many – if not more – contortionists who have trained their bodies to do so. Whether this is an undertaking that complements a certain degree of natural ability, or a physicality achieved through obsessive and dogged training, the result is still a body which – once onstage – defies our understanding of what 'normal bodies' can accomplish. Regardless of the answer, for a North American audience the connection of contortion to freakshow does remain, in subtle or overt ways.

I've ordered myself a copy of the anthology in which Hurley's writings are published and am eagerly awaiting its arrival, but in the meantime – what to think of the born freak vs the made freak in the context of VACUUM? The apparatus used in the act amplifies visual presentation of the body as severed, as jumbled and out of order ('faked freak', by Hurley's estimations).

Because of the way the latex presses in against my body while performing, it obscures small or large parts of my body at any given moment; sometimes only a few limbs are visible, or sometimes the torso is visible but not the limbs, etc. This visual phenomenon (a visual nod to dismemberment) is sometimes offered as an explanation as to why some folks find contortion a disturbing and unpleasant act to watch: it presents the body as literally out-of-order, with arms and legs arranged next to other parts of the body we don't normally see them in (for more on this, read Karl Toepfer's 'Twisted Bodies' essay).

The VACUUM act takes the audience through a slow-motion, slowly-blinking slideshow of their own discomfort with the body-gone-wrong (Disability studies scholar Rod Michalko is who you're going to want to look up if 'the body gone wrong' is something that piqued your interest). It disturbs, on different levels, and the parallel to freakshow is amplified in the process. •





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\*COLONIALISM IS AN ONGOING PROCESS, NOT A HISTORICAL EVENT:

STRANGE WONDERFUL CREATURE ACKNOWLEDGES THAT THE LAND UPON WHICH TORONTO SITS IS THE TRADITIONAL TERRITORY OF MANY NATIONS INCLUDING THE MISSISSAUGAS OF THE CREDIT, THE ANISHNABEG, THE CHIPPEWA, THE HAUDENOSAUNEE AND THE WENDAT PEOPLES. TODAY, THIS MEETING PLACE IS STILL THE HOME TO MANY INDIGENOUS PEOPLE FROM ACROSS TURTLE ISLAND. I AM GRATEFUL TO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO LIVE, LEARN, WRITE, AND CREATE ON THIS LAND.