SPECIAL ISSUE

MAKING A LIVING WITH A CRITICAL ART?

Moral Ambivalences of Street Circus Artists from the Southern Cone Facing Neoliberalism

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Abstract

In the last two decades, shortcomings brought on by the crises of neoliberalism have pushed Latin American circus artists to reclaim the streets as their stage and to engage in transnational circulations. Based on an investigation conducted in Chile between 2016 and 2019, this article delves into the moral ambivalence that arises in the street circus activity from the intertwining of artistic, political, and economic motivations, with circus being seen as a way of criticizing dominant stances and order as well as a "good" way of earning one's life in the Global South. The contradictions raised are analysed through the concepts of "artist critique" (Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski) and of "neoliberal reason" (Veronica Gago), showing how street circus challenges some oppositions that structure most of the art worlds, by reconfiguring the sense of critic and the economic necessities.

Keywords: *Circus Arts, Chile, transnational circulations, informal labour, artist critique, neoliberal reason*

Introduction

Since the end of the dictatorship in 1990, circus in Chile has experienced a renewal of its aesthetic forms, its sociology, and its economies. It is part of a broader renewal movement that has affected Latin America since the end of dictatorships and certain northern countries, such as France and Quebec, since the 1970s. In these spaces are deployed "distinct reinvention dynamics of circus arts" (Spinelli 2015, 10). The circus is experiencing a transnationalization process that is accentuated by current globalization dynamics, both cultural (Appadurai 1996; Canclini 2005) and economic (Bazin and Selim 2002), that stimulate aesthetic and human circulation. A contemporary circus market unfolds transnationally, such as in the case of the North American multinational company Cirque du Soleil, in the context of a cultural industries upsurge. Artists travel to maintain their professional activities, seeking out spaces where to perform and advertise scenic arts that are globally interconnected. Therefore, the aesthetics of the circus are circulating and influencing each other from different spaces around the world, as Magali Sizorn shows in the case of the trapeze (Sizorn 2019). The development of professional circus schools since the 1970s, particularly in Europe and in the Americas, is another factor that pushes the circulation of performers and their aesthetics. As we will see,

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this network of professional schools induces some transnational circulations, with young artist travelling to enroll in internationally prestigious schools, such as the Superior School of Circus Art in Brussels (ESAC).

Based on an ethnographic investigation conducted in Chile between 2016 and 2019, this article examines the moral tensions aroused by the street work of artists from the South, focusing on Chilean circus performers. Drawing from the trajectories of circus performers, the article shows how these artists engage in a transnationalization of their activity that is concurrent with its practice in the street. They leave their country in search of better professional conditions, to neighbouring countries and Western Europe, where circus arts are better recognized and supported.

This case highlights moral ambivalence present in artistic realms, linked to the intertwining of economic, artistic, and political reasons. This activity elicits both pride and frustration among street circus performers, leading to conflicts of values. A value-based rationality (Weber 2013), revolving around autonomy and critique, emerges and clashes with a goal-oriented rationality (Weber 2013) corresponding to the pride of making do in a world that offers few opportunities to agents from the Global South. I propose to explore this combination through the concept of "neoliberal reason" (Gago 2014), intersecting with that of "artist critique" (Chiapello and Boltanski 2011). This approach allows us to understand the conflicts of value in the frame of a world marked by neolibaralization and the emergence of artistic practice that combine critical stance and subsistence imperative.

Chilean Street Circus: Marginalities and Mobilities

Context of the Practice and the Survey

After an 18-year dictatorship, Chile entered a phase of democratic transition in 1990. Cultural activity then exploded. Starting in 1994, young Chileans gathered to practice circus techniques at the Parque Forestal of Santiago. They initiated a circus movement that developed on the fringes of family circuses. They began to perform " in street circles" (*ruedos*) and professionalized with promotional activities (that they called *eventos*) in the flourishing entertainment sectors, as well as in circus teaching, particularly in the sector of "social circus", a pedagogy that aims at fostering personal improvement in vulnerable people through circus practice (Spiegel 2016).

In 2007 a movement towards the institutionalization of the circus began with the creation of circus-specific funds within the National Council for Culture and Arts (*Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las Artes*, CNCA). Based on annual competitive grants, called *Fondarts*, this initiative carries on an incomplete process of professionalization. Although some circus performers and companies can benefit from funds to produce their projects, the competitive nature of the application process and the short duration of the funding discourage most of the artists from applying. Cultural authorities also do not invest in an infrastructure plan capable of providing the appropriate spaces for circus practice, creation, and transmission to the majority. As a result, most circus artists work without funding, as do the majority of the circus spaces (schools, training and rehearsing spaces). The CNCA institution also values

aesthetics inspired by foreign circus styles such as the French and Québécois, that most Chilian circus groups lack time and means to develop. Applying to *Fondarts* also requires specialized administrative and accounting skills that most artists do not possess. In the end, this system creates a climate of competition and precariousness that excludes most local circus artists. The sector thus remains largely informal and focused on promotional enterprises. A study conducted by the CNCA in 2014 shows that 36.5% of circus contracts are sealed with an oral agreement. 29.7% of the circus shows are played in plazas and streets, compared with merely 16.3% in theatres and cultural centres (Lasnibat and Unzueta 2014, 25, Table 12). It also shows that 37% of the circus fundings are made "voluntarily" outside of any formal agreements, mainly through contributions from the public, such as car drivers, street spectators, or people attending events in unfunded circus spaces (Lasnibat and Unzueta 2014, 25, Table 14). Besides, only one among the numerous circus schools in the country offers professional training. The conditions for professionalization thus remain precarious for the majority, who work in the street either to supplement other activities or in a specialized manner. Many then head abroad.

However, at the time of the survey (from 2016 to 2019), the circus sector was tending to reorganize with an increase in institutional and formal activity. Unfortunately, data on this transformation do not exist (the 2014 survey being very unique in the field of Chilean circus), but the survey carried out and the knowledge of Chilian circus sector from 2008 draw some clear trends. More circus companies present their work in spaces dedicated to art that are more interested in circus, such as theatre. This shift happens under the growing influence of the CNCA and the increased capacity among circus professionals, after more than ten years of institutionalization, to apply for cultural funds efficiently. The growing number of circus artists trained in the local professional school and in spaces of internationally dominant circuses (Dupuy 2023), such as the Western European, also results in an increase of artists socialized to the rules of institutional circus, and to aesthetics corresponding with institutional expectations. These artists then gain greater access to funds. They also contribute to spreading this model of circus through the recognition of their productions and the teaching in the main circus spaces in Chile. Nevertheless, commercial contracts, where circus is used as a promotional tool for private clients, continue to be a big part of circus artists' professional activity. Therefore, most circus performers combine informal practices with formal contracts. While the Chilian circus sector can appear less dominated by informal activity than in the past, it still remains dominated by it, including its street performance dimension.

I present here the trajectories of four circus performers[1], whom I have associated with and conducted biographical interviews with, showing how circus performers engage in transnational circulations by practicing street circus. These data were gathered as a part of a doctoral investigation conducted between 2016 and 2022. The ethnographic process included observations in the major places of the new Chilean circus, mainly in Santiago, Valparaiso, Temuco, Valdivia, Villarica and Alto Hospicio near Iquique. My entry into the field was based on a previous experience as a circus artist in France and Argentina during the 2000s, which led me to work for a few months in Chile between 2008 and 2009 and to perform as

[1] All the personal names have been anonymized.

a street artist with Latin American performers in Spain. This experience contributed to building a certain complicity with the subjects of my inquiry. My personal experience also contributed to the way I have documented the transnational dimension, integrating, with a broad reflexive work, personal experiences into the data. The interviews mentioned are part of a broader set of eighty interviews carried out with circus artists and people related to the sector, mainly focused on their trajectories. The choice of the four artists presented corresponds with diverse factors. First, they all show a strong engagement in street practice, and their recognition among their peers allows them to talk about it extensively, developing forms of reflexivity in their practices. They therefore represent the broadest shared ethical and political posture regarding the street circus practice and influence the stances of the entire group. These four people also represent social diversity among Latin American street artists, ranging from very low status to more privileged middle-class, as well as diversity in their transnational trajectories, some more centered on South America, others turned towards Europe. I have also chosen to present artists from the same generation, as both the local and global context they are engaged in differs significantly from earlier periods. These artists are also old enough to have a built consistent trajectory and to elaborate a discourse on them. This choice finally corresponds with my decision to integrate some of my own experience into the data, as some of their temporality and spaces match my own as a circus artist.

Trajectories of Latin American Circus Performers

Vicente

I had contacted Vicente to find out about the circus space he works in, in a popular sector of Santiago. The interview followed a structured pattern: asking the person about their life, how they became involved in the circus, then talking about the circus space they are a part of, and finally gathering their opinion on Chilian circus.

Vicente was born in 1985 in a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of Santiago. He was mainly raised by his older sister, after his father had drowned himself in alcohol and his mother had left the house. He experienced depression and polyaddiction. While in high school he participated in a circus workshop at a community centre:

> *It was a moment with lots of conflicts, I had economic and familiar problems, my situation was unstable, emotionally also. I got into this workshop, and it was like a release, because I was going up the silk and my adrenaline was surging!… The workshop ended, it was the end of school, I felt like I had no future in Santiago. I left and started mochiliando (travelling with a backpack) in Latin America, doing the semaforo (traffic light)*[2]. (Vicente, July 20, 2018)[3]

[2] "*Hacer el semaforo*" or "working at the traffic light" means doing a circus performance, most of the time juggled, when the light is red. The artist(s) then pass a hat in between the cars, receiving voluntary contributions from drivers through their windows. The activity is highly common in South America and also practiced in other continents by Latin American performers or others who imitate them.

[3] All the conversations have been held in Spanish and translated into English by the author. The quotations of books (from English, Spanish, and French) have also been translated into English by the author.

Vicente then collaborated with various street artists, learning the basics of partner acro and working in street circles.

After Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, and Uruguay, Vicente arrived in Brasilia. He joined the Circus Training Centre (CETAC) attached to the Olympic Centre. He financed his training by working at the *semaforo* and doing maintenance work there. “As I couldn’t afford it, they proposed me to work for the school, doing things like cleaning, in exchange for accessing the classes of distinct techniques, mainly acrobatics.” (Vicente, July 20, 2018)

After a tour in Brazil, Vicente returned to Chile. He joined a circus program in Calama and a street artist collective. He returned to Santiago in 2008 and got involved in a school project with a collective of circus performers. His professional experience positions him as a pillar of the association, both as teacher and performer. He is now a respected circus performer, especially for his knowledge in partner acro.

Facundo

I met Facundo during a trip to southern Chilian region Araucanía, aiming to learn about circus development outside of the main Chilian cities. I contacted Facundo to find out about the circus company he had built with his partner in his native town. The interview followed the same pattern as with Vicente. I then spent two nights at Facundo’s home, giving the occasion to exchange more informally, for instance about his plan of working in Europe for the summer season. I also watched him perform juggling at a city event.

Facundo was born in 1987 in Villlarica, to a nurse mother and a bus driver father. He discovered juggling at the age of 15 and developed a passion for it. “From then I started looking for people who also juggled, and I didn’t stop juggling anymore.” (Facundo, December 18, 2018) He started juggling and working at the *semaforo* in the nearby town of Temuco, with a group of circus performers. “Working regularly in the street allowed me to get more economically independent. I went to circus conventions and got more connected with the circus world that was concentrated in Santiago.”

Like many other young Chilians wanting to study, Facundo travelled to Argentina in 2005 to enroll at the University of Buenos Aires, where he received free public education, unlike in Chile. He studied combined arts and frequented various circus venues, which were more numerous and structured in Buenos Aires than in Santiago.

> *There were many people who did and lived from the circus. My parents had a lot of prejudices about that profession, they didn’t support my project, but the environment in Buenos Aires gave me confidence. After a year I dropped out of my studies to dedicate myself to the circus.* (Facundo, December 18, 2018)

Facundo immersed himself for five years in the circus in Buenos Aires, which was then rapidly expanding (Infantino 2015).

In 2010, he left Buenos Aires with a stage act and “travelled across the continent between festivals and conventions” (Facundo, December 18, 2018). He settled in Sao Paulo, where he joined the “street circus movement Circo no beco” (Facundo, December 18, 2018). He

worked with various local companies, living from street circles and commercial contracts for malls, nightclubs, or parades.

He returned to Santiago in 2014, where he met his future partner, Carlota, a Colombian circus performer. The couple settled in Facundo's hometown in the South, where they engage in a partnership with the new municipal cultural centre. They conducted circus workshops, performed in public spaces and in the cultural centre. In 2015, they opened a pre-professional circus training program. They also organized the Festival del Sur, in which street circus performers from Latin America and Europe participate. In 2018 and 2019, Facundo performed in Europe with a street show, earning "from the hat" the first year and with some contracts the second.

Elena and Alcides

I was introduced to Alcides and Elena by Alcides' father, a teacher in the professional circus school in Santiago. I spent time with them at the circus space La Tienda Roja[4] in Valparaiso, where they were staying for the summer with their toddler in their truck, working with other circus artists transiting in Valparaiso. The interview was led at La Tienda Roja as a part of a series of interviews with Chileno-Argentinean circus artists couples, with the aim of documenting transnational links in the Chilian circus.

Elena was born in 1988 in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, in a middle-class family. Her mother was a psychologist, and her father was a photographer. "As a kid I was very stimulated by arts and sports, with this free access to dance, theater, gymnastics that exists in Argentina. I have also been supported by my family that counts numerous artists." (Elena, December 30, 2018)

From 2010 onwards, Elena took circus classes in various spaces in the capital. She formed an aerial cradle duo (a technique close to flying trapeze) and practiced with a teacher trained in higher schools of circus in Brussels and Paris. While it seemed impossible to "institutionalize herself in the circus world" (Elena, December 30, 2018) by training at workshops in Buenos Aires, the duo auditions in La Arena professional circus school unsuccessfully. They then tried in Europe, applying to the École Supérieure des Arts du Cirque (ESAC) in Belgium and others in France, but failed the selections. The duo stayed in Brussels to train with a famous Russian aerial cradle teacher who worked at ESAC.

Elena met Alcides through the Argentinian Chilean street duo Paloma and Augusto, who were to become their mentors, as they affirm: "We are at La Tienda Roja to learn from them, because they deliver socio-political content and that's what we want to do" (Elena, December 30, 2018).

Alcides, born in 1989 in a working-class neighbourhood in Santiago, first successfully passed the selections in ESAC, in Brussels, but had to drop out because of visa problems. When Elena met him, he was studying at the circus school in Lille, France, and financed his life by juggling at traffic lights. While being in a long-distance relationship between Brussels and Lille, the couple conceived a child in 2013. They decided to abandon their respective projects to earn a living on the street circus. They worked at traffic lights and put together

[4] This name has been anonymized to protect the privacy of the circus people involved.

a street performance that combines juggling and acrobatics, which they performed in Spain, France, Argentina, and Brazil.

Upon returning to Chile in 2014, they became teachers at a circus school in Patagonia. They participated in street circus festivals in Argentina and Chile, including the Festival del Sur (2016) organized by Facundo's company. After a season in northern Chile in 2017, they returned to Europe for the festival season in Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. They then acquired a converted truck that they send by boat to Argentina to live in. They then worked on the Argentinian coast with a company that has an agreement with the municipality guaranteeing them a location with bleachers. They returned to Europe in 2018 to fulfil various contracts at summer festivals.

The trajectories described fit a typical pattern among the circus performers encountered since the 2000s, characterized by transnational mobility and work in public spaces. These departures from the country are motivated by opportunities to perform abroad and/or to receive training professionally, facilitating subsequent professionalization either in the home country or in the country of emigration. They are often linked to the desire to travel or settle abroad. Training and performing abroad are thus part of a professionalization project open to a globalized circus.

The Moral Ambivalence: Between Critic and Subsistence

The neoliberal model dominating in Chile since the dictatorship, qualified as a "neoliberal state" (Pinto and Salazar 1999), is characterized by complete labour market deregulation that includes a privatization of all basic services. This induces a polarization in the society, between extremely rich people and the masses, who face constant precarity and often poverty. With some of the highest working hours in the world, Chile is a country where "personal and social life is invaded by the logic of work-without-end" (Araujo and Martuccelli 2013, 132).Work-without-end thus appears as a value. These conditions affect the popular sectors and the young that face more precarity than other groups, after higher education has been entirely privatized in a society where tertiarization makes it a key to employment.

In this context, street circus appears as a means of subsistence that is quite enviable, offering an accessible source of income, often more attractive than underpaid and inaccessible jobs—as shown by Julieta Infantino in Argentina (Infantino 2015). But this activity appears to be far more than just a means of subsistence. It is also seen as a way of criticizing the dominant stances of society, as an art that develops in spaces of everyday life, in the margin of the spaces dedicated to culture, and as a means of emancipating its actors from social constraints. For these artists, the circus represents a way to engage socially and, according to their words, politically. Street circus thus appears to combine the subsistence and the critic, two dimensions that are usually opposed in the art world. This gives rise to certain paradoxes, revealed through acts and discourses of circus performers and exposing some moral ambivalence that I now propose to address.

> *Yesterday we performed on the streets in Viña del Mar [a beach resort adjacent to Valparaíso], in front of a very snobbish upper-middle-class audience. And I had some props that would have put us at a disadvantage: I wore a headband with a poop on it, and my costume had Mickey Mouse printed on it with the words "decolonize yourself". And well, I decided not to use these things because in certain places, if you want it to work, you have to figure out what people want to hear… Yes, you can try to make a protest, but you can also think okay, this time I'm not going to succeed. You weigh that because you're also there to fill your hat… You think, will my complaint serve a purpose in this place? I often say that we prostitute ourselves, for money, because of the context in which we work. But I also believe that we show a philosophy, a way of life that is not accepted by everyone, through the temporalities, the space we invest in, how we move around, what it means…. For prostitution, I'm talking about something else, about contracts we make for companies, which have nothing to do with sharing. You have to do it, it's part of the job, of society, of surviving here.* (Elena, January 30, 2018)

This interview excerpts reveals tensions in the values structuring street circus practice between the need to survive, to generate money, and the ethical importance of having a critical impact. To understand these tensions, I propose to identify the main values structuring street circus practice, situating them in their context of emergence. The values of autonomy, solidarity, and criticism then appear to coexist and combine with an economic rationality of the type described by Max Weber as "goal-oriented rationality" (Weber 2013).

At the Core of the Critics: Autonomy, Solidarity, Democracy

Ethics of Autonomy

In the absence of accessible, public, and popular cultural offerings, circus performers construct practices and networks that allow them to work without the support of public policies, and to some extent, outside of the entertainment market. This mode of operation is designated by the emic term *autogestión*, that can be approximately translated by "self-management" or "self-organizing" without being a complete equivalent. In Chile (and in other Latin American countries), *autogestión* designate a socio-economical model that can concern one person but implies more often a group aggregated around a project, such as a circus show or a circus school. It refers to an economic autonomy cultivated through informal activities that is linked to the desire and the obligation to make do without the support of cultural institutions. This desire is often linked to a distrust towards the state that is particularly strong among youth, in a context of "reduced democracy" (Ruiz 2015). It also relates to the institutional inadequacy existing in the field of circus.

However, street activity exposes artists to multiple risks: for instance, they do not benefit from guaranteed wages or social coverage. Occupying a grey legal area, being sometimes tolerated, sometimes repressed, can bring them into conflict with law enforcement and local agents, such as residents. Despite this, the autonomy provided by the street circus remains highly valued. It offers the opportunity to earn money in a context of precariousness, by engaging in a beloved activity. The "philosophy" related to "a way of life that is not accepted

by everyone", as expressed by Elena, shows a valorization of autonomy that corresponds to a way of living, and not only a way to "produce one-self" (Chiapello and Boltanski 2011). This is particularly clear in this extract from an interview with the street circus artist Augusto, friend and mentor of Elena and Alcides:

> *In the neighbourhood where I come from, ..., there is no future for us and our descendants .... But I had the chance to live this circus life, that is so exciting, with this nomadic, free thing, which transforms you and will always surprise you!* (Augusto, December 31, 2018)

The ideal of social emancipation appears linked with that of subjective emancipation. The association of "surprise" with "freedom" and "nomadism" tend to refer to what Chiapello and Boltanski call a "self-production" and a "culture of uncertainty" (Chiapello and Boltanski 2011, 88), designating a way of living that goes far beyond the strict "self-management". From an emic perspective, the autonomy cultivated in circus activities appears to be a gateway to freedom, while it is in the first place the consequence of external constraints that tend to exclude a certain group of artists. The tensions between imposition and free choice contribute, in this sense, to the moral ambiguities that one can witness among street circus artists.

Solidarity as a Means

The value of autonomy combines with that of solidarity, of which it is one of the means of realization. Circus artists insist on the need to collaborate and share their means and knowledge as a way to sustain their activities. For instance, solidarity is at the heart of working at traffic lights, which, although most often practiced solo, relies on collective and affinity-based organization. Street performers work in groups to share an intersection or a sector. The urban configuration forces collaboration among these performers, who must protect each other's success by respecting territories while sharing the most coveted intersections.

Similarly, artists performing in street circles operate in a way that involves sharing spaces. In the summer of 2007, I performed with three Argentinians in the streets of northern Spain. My work partners always made sure upon arrival that there were no other artist preparing to perform. If there were, the custom was to ask if it would be possible to perform after those who arrived first without interfering with their plans. Such negotiations aim to maintain good relations among artists and reasoned use of space. The audience must be renewed, and except in places with very high attendance, it is good to alternate performances. In this sense, solidarity appears as an ensemble of shared conventions that allow each one the possibility to carry out and benefit from their activity, in a context of rare resources.

Solidarity is also at the heart of events such as festivals. The Festival del Sur already mentioned is based on, according to Facundo, " love and heart". All participants are paid through hat collections and participate in logistics (accommodation, cooking, setup, etc.) on a voluntary basis. Facundo explains: "Artists come from all over the continent and Europe. It's a great event, even though everything relies on collaborative work among friends." (Facundo, December 18, 2018) Solidarity here appears intertwined with the concept of friendship, that becomes another value associated with the activity.

During their travels abroad, street artists can also rely on accommodation and support from their peers. In Valparaíso, for example, Paloma and Augusto from Argentina can count on parking their trucks on the premises of La Tienda Roja, where they can enjoy facilities such as the kitchen and a training space, spending the summer there collaborating with local artists such as Elena and Alcides. Street artists frequently join forces in shows combining each other's acts, allowing them to renew their performances without completely revising their repertoire. The Valparaíso artists share the arrangements they have built over the years, such as with a restaurant owner who provides them with electricity and speakers. Street circus performers then form a transnational network, which allows them to compensate for the difficulties associated with their position as informal workers and foreigners.

The solidarity that is practiced by circus artists thus corresponds to common sense—the solidarity that unites peers together—while concurrently supporting social (like friendship) and economic practices that aim at enabling everyone, in the context of reduced resources and job opportunities, to carry out and benefit from circus activity. This influences the forms and ways to do circus, such as in the case of a street circus show that aggregate different acts, or in the organization of a mainly self-managed festival. But once again, from the perspective of the actors, the art forms and the commitments associated with external constraints appear as choices related to values such as friendship and solidarity. From this lens, the necessity to act with others tends to reinforce friendship bonds, strengthening it as a value and justifying engagement in the activity. A cycle is then built that tend to increase the importance of certain values in the maintenance in a hard, precarious, and little recognized activity.

Art Life as a Democratic Practice

Street performance is imbued with a critical ideal, corresponding to what circus performers see as a political stance, as Paloma asserts: "Our work is political because we take to the streets; it is our platform for expression." (Paloma, December 31, 2018)

The political dimension often revolves around a democratic ideal, as evidenced here:

> *The audience is more democratic on the street. It is democracy. We allow people who have no opportunity to be spectators, in a context where entertainment means sitting in front of a giant plasma screen, hypnotizing yourself with TV nonsense, the message from above…. So, giving anyone who happens to be there the opportunity to be a spectator, to show them that they deserve our respect…. That's what we're looking for. We could just stand there selling balloons, which I'm not criticizing, but that's not what we're looking for artistically. Relaxation, entertainment, laughter, everyone deserves it, and it's crucial for the artist also to say that something is wrong.* (Elena, December 31, 2018)

According to this extract, street circus is a democratic art in its ability to reach everyone and provide an alternative to the discourse from above. Mass entertainment acts as a repellent figure, with "good circus" expected to divulge a critical message, according to what seems to be a classical conception of political art. The value of democracy thus challenges two different conceptions of entertainment. On one hand, the mass entertainment that is seen as

a tool for the power to subjugate, that takes place mostly in private spaces. On the other hand, the entertainment provided in public spaces by artists that consider themselves to be at the margin. This opposition refers to the critique of a society where art tends to be subsumed into "cultural industries".

The democratic dimension considered refers to giving access to a marginal art, toward a marginal audience. Taking place in space that is not dedicated to culture, street performance passes as part of an "illegitimate" culture (Bourdieu 1992). But this stigma is turned around to challenge cultural hierarchies, as in other street art movements (Gaber 2009; Maleval-Lachaud 2010). This challenge to cultural hierarchies is in line with historical *"Avant-gardes"* (Joyeux-Prunel 2016), with significant local lineage. The Chilean Popular Unity (1970–1973) first sought to implant arts into the daily lives as a tool for conscientization, by supporting street expressions such as murals. After the rupture of the dictatorship, this movement regained strength in the 1990s, with distinct ideals, conscientization giving way to popular entertainment. The first Chilean circus performers belong to this current. The street circus performers studied belong to a third movement, attempting to reclaim the mantle of polemic art while valuing humour and lightness.

The claim to make a democratic art thus refers to a critique of democracy itself, which is the subject of great struggles during the Chilean "democratic transition". If democracy is then valued in reference to the previous dictatorship, the democratic transition regime is criticized for being "restricted" (Ruiz 2015, 80) and causing social discomfort that occasionally transforms into spectacular uprisings (as during the *Despertar Chileno*—Chilian Awakening—in 2019).

For these artists, democracy is both an ideal and a practice, reflected in the ways collective activities and spaces are managed, corresponding to an attempt to carve out spaces in everyday life for collectively self-managed spaces (Zarzuri 2021). Through the lens of the performers, street circus appears not only as a democratic art but also as a broader democratic practice, embedded in a particular way of living. Autonomy, solidarity, friendship, and democracy appear as central values of this artistic activity, justifying persistance despite the difficulties and lack of recognition associated with it. These values also contribute to shaping the content and form of the art made, as well as the organization of the collective activity, shaping the morphology of this art world (Becker 1982) itself.

Economic Rationality: Value or Counter-Value?

When I arrived in Santiago in 2008, while training in a circus house, I attended daily meetings of *semaforistas* discussing their workday. The amount collected while working at the traffic light was at the centre of the discussions, in a friendly competition aiming to shine among peers and map out the intersections and schedules that would yield the best earnings. The activity was thus evaluated in terms of profits made, balanced with the energy expended.

The evaluation in monetary terms is also central to street circle performances. Artists seek the highest possible compensation within the constraints of this particular space. When I performed in Spain in 2007 with Argentinian artists, the highlight of the day was when, settled in the caravan, we counted the day's earnings. The higher the "hat", the happier and

satisfied we felt. During exchanges with other performers, the topic of earnings was extensively discussed, serving as indicators of the best places to perform and a source of pride.

The search for territories where a renewed public can ensure the best income, motivates street performers as much, if not more, than the allure of travel. The earnings from street practices thus constitute a reason for the activity, which can be described, following Weber, as a goal-oriented rationality. But while earnings is valued as a measure of success, the art regime tends to reject the value of money, particularly when art aims to be critical: the pursuit of profit appears incompatible with its critical potential (Bourdieu 1992). The case of the street circus disrupts these categories. Value-based rationality (such as autonomy and critique) coexists with a goal-oriented rationality (achieving the best returns).

This combination generates moral tensions, as when Elena says she compromises on decolonial discourse to ensure a decent income. The non-autonomy of the field in relation to the public and the economic sphere is then experienced as degrading. But this obstacle is compensated in discourse by the valorization of a marginal lifestyle supposed to impact society by showing "another way", less attached to materialism and emancipated from some of the times and spaces prescribed by work and moral obligations. Street performers' rationality thus diverges from the dominant economic rationality, not seeking capitalization but rather the possibility to continue their activity and lifestyle. However, this lifestyle does not exclude certain alienating aspects, and the insertion into forms of work corresponding to the dominant model. For example, Elena describes some practices as "prostitution", involving "contracts … that have nothing to do with sharing."

The social constraints mentioned and the regret of not being able to practice art autonomously align with the idea that the artistic field should, to be critical, be autonomous from the economic field. However, the goal-oriented rationality of street practices is not a subject of shame but rather emerges as justification for the activity. From the perspective of the circus performers, being economically self-sufficient brings pride and contributes to realizing an ideal of autonomy that fits into the critical stance.

Thinking of The Critical Potential of Art from the South

An Artist Critique

It is intriguing to examine the critical pattern that I have described through the lens of the "artist critique" model developed in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Chiapello and Boltanski 2011). Beginning with critiques emerging in the 1960s vis-à-vis a "second capitalism" characterized by large industrial conglomerates, the authors delineate between "social critique", influenced by Marxism, and "artist critique". Rooted late 19th century bohemianism, artist critique denounces the loss of meaning associated with widespread standardization and commodification and the alienation linked to the submission to prescribed morality and labour in prescribed spaces and times. Associated ideals include prioritizing "self-production", that is, focusing on the development of one owns subjectivity, and a "culture of uncertainty", in contrast with the submission to times and spaces. The authors claim that while social critique was undermined in the 1970s and 1980s, artist critique was neutralized by

being integrated into "new capitalism", aligning with the ideology of managerialism and competition.

These phases appear quite clearly in the Chilean context from the 1960s. The period of the Popular Unity government (1970–1973) characterizes a moment of capitalist contestation, followed by a capitalist reaction during the dictatorship (1973–1990), that then consolidated into a new form of capitalism, designated as neoliberalism, during the democratic transition.

The Chilean street circus is particularly interesting from the perspective of artist critique, giving an example of what this critique becomes in an achieved neoliberalized context. This circus develops in the context of reduced access to the wage market, widespread precariousness, and weak state intervention in the arts, that respond to neoliberal postulates by placing aspiring artists in competition and an ideal of excellency that excludes the majority. Much like in Argentina (Infantino 2015), the precariousness and frustration generated by Chilean society's model leads some to embrace professions outside the formal market. The street circus appears in this context as an "exciting" activity, "bearers of possibilities of self-realization and spaces of freedom for action" (Chiapello and Boltanski 2011, 53). These artists consider escaping exploitation and alienation by creating their own activity outside the realm of wage labour. They then embody a form of artist critique.

While "market domination [is established] as an impersonal force that [...] designs desirable people and products-services" (Chiapello and Boltanski 2011, 53), these artists identify themselves as desirable individuals who develop desirable services. They consider their activity as a way of "reenchanting themselves", through the "production of self" given in expressive activity. They also cultivate a culture of uncertainty, with a work characterized by mobility, unpredictability, and adventure. The activity is then lived as an individual emancipation (economic, social, geographic, and political), which passes for a support of criticism and social change.

This artist critique thus reintegrates some aspects of social criticism by placing them in the modes of life and localized actions, operating with a reduction of the scale at which social change can be driven, if compared with a Marxist stance. Through the concept of "democratic art", they cultivate the ideal of an art accessible to all, which reconfigures certain social hierarchies. These artists also consider to be "opposing the logic of special interests" (Chiapello and Boltanski 2011) by cultivating links of solidarity and complementarity. Critical activity is therefore thought beyond the work of scenically representation, in the way of living, organizing oneself to act and provide for collectively, inserting in micro-politics.

While self-production emerges as an injunction of neoliberal ideology, the case of the Chilean street circus shows us how it is incorporated and reengaged in a critical project of social change. The whole combines an ethical vision of the life of artist with a conception of political art (in its contents), social art (in the target audiences), and critical art (by promoting self-production).

A Neoliberal Reason at the Core of Art

The artistic activities studied here integrate the theme of subsistence into the artist critique, particularly through the ideal of *autogestión*, marking an innovation in relation to the model

developed by Boltanski and Chiapello. The ability, or rather success, to survive off one's art is valued as a sign of emancipation. The self-management promoted by neoliberalism and a certain capacity to "do it by oneself" then appear as the mark of a life lived in a critical mode.

I propose to explore the combination of these different rationalities through the concept elaborated by Veronica Gago of "neoliberal reason", based on her research on the informal market of La Salada, in Buenos Aires (Gago 2014). Neoliberal reason is a form of "rationality from below that negotiates benefits in the context of dispossession" (Gago 2014, 11) induced by the crises of Latin American neoliberalism since the late 1900s. Developed from the Global South and based on informal practices linked to globalization, this concept is interesting for understanding the practices and tensions structuring street circus.

The practice of street circus fits into an expanding informal sector in Chile and elsewhere in Latin America (Gago, Cielo, and Gachet 2018). On the sidewalks and in the urban transport of Chilean metropolises, one encounters many people hawking second-hand clothes, food, and handicrafts. The use of public space for informal subsistence activities is therefore not limited to street circus but corresponds to a type of activity widespread among the most vulnerable.

At the very foundation of the street artist's life lies the ability to conform, as a marginalized social agent, to the constraints imposed by neoliberal capitalism: the ability to adapt, for example, by working in informality, the ultimate form of labour deregulation; or to carve out spaces and tools for work with very little, relying on solidarity and ingenuity. A form of resourcefulness economy is then developed, as in the La Salada market, that becomes a source of pride.

Taking place outside institutional frameworks and contractual transactions, intersecting solidarity and market logics, the street circus invokes the model of "popular economies" developed by Gago: a combination of survival and solidarity economies developed "in the face of the neoliberal destabilization of wage labor as a model capable of including the masses" (Gago, Cielo, and Gachet 2018, 12). Street circus thus fits into a form of "popular entrepreneurship" that seeks to "take charge of conditions that are not guaranteed" (Gago 2014, 13) by society in its dominant model, such as material subsistence or subjective fulfillment. Invested in response to needs, desires, and possibilities specific to a generation grown in the context of a neoliberal state, street circus constitutes a form of economy that "does not exist in a world separate from that of calculation and accumulation … [and] is constituted in tension, negotiation, and in the interstices of capital" (Gago, Cielo, and Gachet 2018, 16).

From the perspective of art, this type of circus represents also a capacity to attract a volatile clientele by adapting to the expectations of the audience, according to its social characteristics. The critical capacity then lies in the ability to assess the social fractions composing the audience, to find the right message capable of carrying criticism while satisfying the sensitivity of the most privileged, who are capable of providing the biggest economic retribution.

Analysing street circus practice also allows neoliberal reason to be placed on the political expression level. The practice attracts crowds of young people in connection with deficiencies in cultural facilities and spaces for expression (Zarzuri 2021). The practice and invest-

ment in street circus thus correspond to a need of people to which the neoliberal state does not respond. Among the "vitalistic" practices identified by Gago, street circus highlights that of critical expression.

The case of street circus, by intertwining economic, political, and artistic reasons, exacerbated by the weakness of policies favouring the circus, shows the ambivalence of neoliberal reason transposed into the artistic field, between autonomy and heteronomous constraints, subsistence and love of art, value-based rationality and goal-oriented rationality.

Inflection of the Artist Critique

Neoliberal reason and artist critique thus tend to combine in street circus, in a form of rationality emerging from the Global South. Alongside the movement identified by Chiapello and Boltanski, in which artist critique is integrated into the "new spirit of capitalism", this case demonstrates how neoliberalism imposes living conditions that can stimulate artist critique. On one hand, this critique emerges in marginal forms of life, while on the other, art is reinvested according to certain terms of artist critique.

Even though street circus practice aligns with classical models of critical art (e. g. through protest content and challenging cultural hierarchies), it also diverges from them in the way artistic practice and livelihood articulate. This is manifested by a revaluation between self-production and material production. Material success signals emancipation, allowing a form of self-production through autonomy, which itself is seen as a means of critique. Neoliberal reasons thus tend to stimulate and nourish artist critique.

A Contesting Grassroot Globalization

Inserted in intense transnational circulations, the case of Chilean street circus shows finally how globalization implies the production and the circulation of new cultural forms, from which "individuals seize themselves as symbolic resources that allow them both to produce local meanings and to participate in the global movement" (Dorin 2005; Raveneau 2008, 3). The circulations of the circus performers and the way they elaborate an artist critique under the influence of neoliberal reason thus appear to contribute to a form of a grassroot globalization (Appadurai 2000).

The case also shows how, within an artistic sector that lack, for emerging from the Global South, some of the resources and supports that other arts, in other areas, benefit from, "crises and ruptures in which [...] agents are bogged down in their subsistence framework lead [...] to revivalisms and accentuated mobilizations of symbolic arrangements" (Bazin and Selim 2002, 13). While responding to globalization from the top, the processes highlighted in this article, that come from the bottom, continue to be shaped by global hierarchies. But these circulations also appear as windows from which to challenge the global order, offering a resource for navigating internationally and opportunities to develop a critical stance. In the heart of neoliberalism lie the seeds of this contestation.

Conclusion

The shortcomings generated by the progress and crises of neoliberalism, exacerbated in the Chilean context, push circus artists to reclaim the streets as their stage. Meanwhile, they engage in transnational movements in search of better conditions for professionalization. A specific type of rationality thus emerges, which addresses issues within the art world (how to make critical art while sustaining oneself?) as well as issues specific to marginalized contexts (how to sustain one's art outside dedicated cultural spaces?).

The analysis in this article shows how Chilean practice of street circus combines both value-based rationality and goal-oriented rationality. The former emphasizes autonomy and criticism, while the latter focuses on subsistence as a measure of success. The merging of criticism with autonomy, especially material autonomy, sheds new light on the relationship between subsistence and political objectives in art. The case of Chilian street circus allows us to incorporate some of the responses elaborated from the bottom in the Global South. Critical action is organized as practices responding to the imperatives of subsistence rather than in opposition to or in autonomy from them. This suggests that the model of "political art", detached from economic and institutional spheres, is, at least nowadays, an illusion.

At the core of engagement in the precarious and under-recognized artistic practice, that is the street circus, lies the main axes of artist critique. However, this critical stance is also a product of marginalized conditions within the neoliberal context, on a global scale. The model of neoliberal reason sheds light on these dynamics, emphasizing a form of popular entrepreneurship aimed at securing conditions for material subsistence and subjective fulfilment, that are not guaranteed by the State, its institutions, or the market. Both material and subjective gains are negotiated, surpassing the dichotomy of imposed versus free choice.

Considering artist critique in conjunction with neoliberal reason allows for the exploration of how marginalized artists develop their imagination (Appadurai 2000) in ways that challenge conventional forms of art, cultivating the ability to pursue political and critical practices through their subsistence activities. In this regard, the artistic endeavours of circus artists highlight the imaginative capacity of Global South agents to forge alternative ways of living that, amidst domination, harbour forms of emancipation. Circulating through South and North, they establish a transnational network, contributing to a grassroots globalization where enmeshed rationalities flow.

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