



**SIDESHOW
DECONSTRUCTING CIRCUS**

EVALUATION

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EVALUATION OF EVALUATION

INTRODUCTION

Hello. If you're reading such a highly specialised document as this then you're probably already familiar with the Deconstructing Circus project. If not, a quick summary: it's a series of interviews with contemporary circus artists and directors published on the website Sideshow. Each article is fronted by a video of a scene from a contemporary circus performance and the interview then hits the artist/director up for insights on how that scene was made. I produced a bunch of these myself, and then commissioned interviews from four other writers: Māra Pāvula, Cesc Martinez, Veronika Stefanova, and Bauke Lievens.

The project was built around the observation that circus artists generally spend far more time on their technical training than they spend watching the work of others and learning through observation/reflection. In an ideal world there would be an abundance of circus performances to see live, but the reality is that artists have to spend a lot on travel if they want to catch the little work that's out there. Deconstructing Circus was intended as a kind of second-best: artists could watch videos of performances originating in different countries – big chunky extracts which would really give them a sense of the piece and its aesthetic – and then the interview would help to reveal the context and the process behind each scene.

The project had a couple of key aims:

- > To encourage artists to share their processes and artistic knowledge for the benefit of the wider field.
- > To create a lasting resource for teaching and

professional development.

- > On an individual level, to give me the conditions to work as an editor with other writers.

Running September 2013 - April 2014, the project produced around twenty interviews with artists from nine countries.

But anyway. You're here for the evaluation. I had some key aims in producing this as well. One of the big problems I've always had working in media in the arts is that there aren't many examples or case studies to follow and that you mostly learn things like a sad trundling robot blindly headbutting the walls of its enclosure. So, I've tried to write something that's honest, useful and reflective. I've divided it into three sections – Before, During and After – and then the appendix.

I hope you can find something meaningful within these pages. If you have any questions or thoughts I'm at the end of this e-mail and happy to talk: john@sideshow-circusmagazine.com

John Ellingsworth
Editor, Sideshow

www.sideshow-circusmagazine.com/magazine/deconstructions

I remember thinking how easy it all was, which, in retrospect, should have been my first warning. The Arts Council's Grants for the Arts application, at least for small grants of < £10,000, seemed pretty straightforward, and so I wrote a couple thousand words about this project that I'd had in mind for several years, sketched out a budget, hit send, and six weeks later was offered the money to make it happen.

Looking back I wish I'd given much more time to this pre-project planning phase as – even though the application was successful – I made a couple of mistakes that caused problems down the line...

WORKLOAD

In the original application I wrote that I'd do 19 interviews over the course of three months and commission a further 11, and that I'd publish one or two a week, and that I'd work a total of 25 days. I greatly underestimated the time it would take me to do the interviews, and also didn't consider how long the production cycle would be on each article (it ended up being anywhere from two to six weeks – some of that being waiting for comments/corrections from the interviewee, chasing images, etcetera).

I think that I should have showed the working plan to some people to get external feedback. I talked to others about the concept, but never about the practicalities of running the project, and so I ended up guessing about a lot of things that were actually extremely important.

And then severely warping or reducing my guessing powers was the fact that when you fill in a funding application there's a little tug of war between greed and fear – you're a little bit motivated to ask for as much money as

possible, but you're also scared that a puffed up application will be rejected. Caught somewhere between these conflicting anxieties my uncertainty transformed into a supreme declarative confidence as I laid out the conditions of the project.

PROJECT SCHEDULE

I had two phases: Step 1, work for a month on the project to try and get a buffer of articles; Step 2 write all the other articles. This had a certain bracing simplicity, but retrospectively I would have liked to include a planning/organisation phase (contacting companies, searching for good scenes to use, arranging interviews), then the buffer production phase, then a main production phase running parallel to a marketing phase, then an evaluation phase.

BUDGET

The budget for the project was fairly simple in that it had only a few lines either side on Income and Expenditure (see Appendix 3 for a breakdown). I put my own money in for match funding because I didn't know where else to get it, and that ended up being a mistake for me on a personal level.

It actually never occurred to me that a festival paying for my flights or hotel could be a cash contribution (I assumed it'd be in-kind), and so now I wish I'd spent more time, pre-application, trying to bring some festivals/events onboard as partners/sponsors. In the end I got support to travel from Festival CIRCa in France and Subcase in Sweden, so I could have included them, and perhaps others, from the start.

The During phase, which we might also call the Labour phase, or the Big Fat Middle phase, is taken here to be the six-ish months where I conducted my own interviews and commissioned/edited the pieces from the four external contributors. Looking back (or down?) on it from my current position I remember enjoying the minutiae of the work during this period and feeling proud of much of the output, yet also, and increasingly with the passage of time, feeling stressed by the greater than anticipated workload.

THE INTERVIEWS

I ended up doing about half the interviews myself and commissioning the other half. Generally each interview lasted anywhere between 40 minutes and two hours, and I preferred not to structure them too heavily. Usually I'd start by talking with the artist about their work in broad terms, then I'd move on to the specific scene and, wherever possible, sit down and watch the video of it with them. Universally I found this provoked a lot of extra detail and observation – the video would prompt the artist to remember things and to reflect on their process and choices, and in its specificity would dig down past any practiced or easy responses.

A couple of the artists (French ones) didn't like 'deconstruction' as an idea, saying that they preferred to preserve the mystery/poetry of their work, but nevertheless once they actually started talking interesting thoughts would come tumbling out. The jugglers met the idea of 'deconstruction' with gusto and often had some minute and detailed observations. Some interviewees talked about their work practically, some conceptually. All part of the rich tapestry of contemporary circus, is how I feel.

Once I'd done an interview I'd transcribe the

whole thing, which would typically leave me with around 6000 - 10,000 words. Then I'd copy that document and go through and delete everything I thought I wouldn't use. Then I'd create a fresh document and put in subheaders with the key ideas or themes that the interview covered and start copy-pasting in chunks of text from the raw transcript, rearranging as necessary. Then I'd work through several edits to smooth out transitions and finalise the structure, which might involve pulling some of the text out of the main body to situate it in a boxout or mini-feature (see Presentation). It was time-consuming, but I'm pleased with the results.

Something I already knew but which this project reinforced is that, as an editor, it's good to interfere – i.e. to rearrange the structure of the text, cut a lot, rewrite parts, sockpuppet the interviewee to get the right transitions, and so on. I always told the artists at the beginning of the process that I would do this and let them look through and make corrections before any article was published; no one ever had a problem with it.

CONTRIBUTORS

On a personal level it was great to work with other writers – something I've always wanted to do with Sideshow – and I feel like their involvement greatly benefited the scope and reach of the final project. All of the contributors did their interviews in another language and translated them into English; I think retrospectively I would have liked to separate a translation fee out from the writing/editing.

One of the key things I learned is that it's good to set firm deadlines. Since the schedule for the project was soon shot to pieces it didn't actually matter if contributors were late with their articles, but I never set them particularly

hard deadlines – just said ‘sometime before January’. I think I did this partly because I wanted to be a relaxed/groovy person to work with, but in the end everyone benefits from clarity and structure.

Another thing: quite near the start of the project I read an interview with Knopf editing legend Robert Gottlieb, and he said something that really struck me: ‘The first thing writers want—and this sounds so basic, but you’d be surprised how unbasic it is in the publishing world—is a quick response. Once they’ve finished a new manuscript and put it in the mail, they exist in a state of suspended emotional and psychic animation until they hear from their editor, and it’s cruelty to animals to keep them waiting [...] easy or not, one’s first job is a swift and honest response—tempered, of course, by tact.’ Obviously a writer invests considerably more of themselves in a novel than an article, but for *Deconstructing Circus* I tried to read through and give a first response to contributions within 24 hours, even if it would take me a week to actually do the final edit. I hope I will now be able to follow the Gottlieb Rule my entire life.

PRESENTATION

Every article in the project is an interview, but none of the texts feature an interviewer – during editing the writer cuts themselves out and stitches everything together into a coherent piece. I like this approach because (a) it focuses on the voice of the artist and skips out the implicit hierarchy of the question/answer approach, and (b) it forces the interviewer/editor to think more about structure/toner/flow and usually leads to a better reading experience. I wanted each article to feel like it was the artist talking to you – in a casual, relaxed and open way – but I also wanted it to be more structured and focused than the average conversation.

I think this approach worked really well – there are a lot of different voices in the project but there’s an overall aesthetic consistency.

One thing I found after doing a couple of interviews and looking at their transcripts was that the material would often go in several different directions, and that I was having to cut things that were interesting but that wouldn’t fit in the flow of the main article. So I started splitting the text in order to produce a main article, direct notes on the video, and sometimes a sort of narrativised image gallery. The Ockham’s Razor interview is a good example of this, and again I’m happy with the format.

Sweeping the difficulties of scheduling and logistics momentarily under the rug, looking back I'm happy with how Deconstructing Circus went. I feel like it was a strong project conceptually – a simple, clear and practical idea – and that the execution bore out the promise of the format.

MARKETING

Perhaps it reveals something that I've put Marketing in the After category and not During or even Before. I felt like as I already had an audience with Sideshow perhaps it wouldn't be too difficult to get the circus world to know about the project. I think that it's had a fairly good pick-up within the sector, but I'd also like it to see the project used as a teaching resource and to try and get it some attention from complimentary fields (dance, physical theatre, etcetera).

I'm going to keep pushing with this and get in touch with some other publications and with universities. Time allowing, I'd like to produce something that's like a lesson plan that includes some of the project material – so it chooses a couple videos/interviews for students to look at beforehand and then suggests some questions and discussion points for the class.

CONTINUATION

I feel like the project has a really strong format, and so if possible I'd like to keep producing deconstructions and perhaps to look at a few performances that are related to circus but identify as dance, live art, or whatever else.

There are a couple other things I want to do as well:

> Promote contributors more: contributors are credited in the footnotes of their articles, but I feel like this hides them a bit. It turned out that way because of the format for the articles (i.e. having the interviewer's voice cut out) and because traditionally I've written everything for Sideshow and feel shy of putting my own name everywhere. I'll add in a separate page with bios and some info, and then I'll look at slightly restructuring the footnotes to give more prominence to the contributor's name.

> Make a map view for the project. As well as having a list of the artists interviewed I'd like to show a map of where they all are, or where the featured performances took place.

> As mentioned above, create a sample lesson plan for educators.

> Create a PDF collection of the interviews for people to download. On the one hand, this seems weird and illogical to me because the PDF format can't embed video and video is central to the project. On the other, people asked me a lot if I was going to do a print book – so a PDF at least gives people the option to print things off easily and quickly themselves.

OVERVIEW

19
INTERVIEWS

6172
UNIQUE VIEWS

3:20
AVG TIME ON PAGE

20
VIDEOS

10,132
VIEWS

2:41
AVG WATCHED

TOTAL TIME INVESTED (SORT OF)*

43,236
MINUTES = 4 WEEKS, 5 DAYS,
7 HOURS

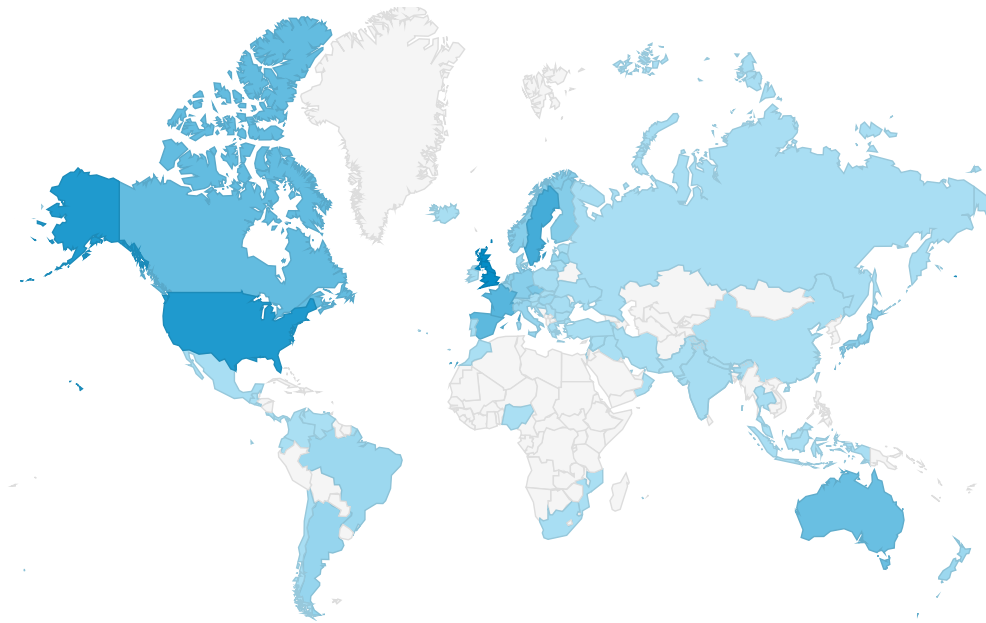
NOTES

* Time invested is a nice metric to use here, but there's a pretty big margin for error because of the way Google Analytics counts time on page, plus because you can't know if a user spent their recorded time reading/watching or away from the computer while they made a cup of tea. Take it as a rough number.

* In general there's a problem with statistical reporting for this project. I used unique views, but one user can create multiple unique views by looking at multiple articles. But I feel like unique visitors doesn't work that well as a measurement either because the person who looks at one article for 15 seconds and the person who spends three hours reading them all would both count as 1 unique visit.

* The above figures were updated 28 June 2014.

VISITOR LOCATIONS



HIGHEST TRAFFIC COUNTRIES	% TOTAL VISITS
UNITED KINGDOM	17%
UNITED STATES	14%
FRANCE	7.9%
SWEDEN	7.3%
CANADA	6.6%
SPAIN	5.8%
AUSTRALIA	5.6%
CZECH REPUBLIC	3.4%
71 OTHERS	67.6%

HIGHEST TRAFFIC CITIES	% TOTAL VISITS
LONDON	3.7%
STOCKHOLM	3.3%
BARCELONA	2.4%
MONTREAL	2%
MELBOURNE	1.6%
PRAGUE	1.5%
HELSINKI	1.3%
PARIS	0.9%
632 OTHERS	83.3%

NOTES

* This is more or less as expected. The geographic spread is similar to Sideshow's audience across the entire website, but with the UK share a little lower: normally it's around a third, here it's about 17%. I think this is just down to the fact that most of the articles were about companies from other countries. Spain, the Czech Republic and Latvia had strong figures reflecting the nationalities of the project's contributors.

* Overall, users from 79 countries visited the project, which sounds nice but is also normal for an English language website on the great wide Internet. Some of the mid-range countries surprised me though: I wouldn't necessarily have expected to see much traffic from Japan (turns out there's a strong juggling scene there), Germany, Brazil or Argentina.

ARTISTS

“It was a while since we did the deconstruction now so I’m not really sure about how I felt doing it. What I remember is that it was a nice experience and that it’s interesting to share your thoughts around certain details of a project with people interested in circus. I think that it’s very good and important that artists share more than just their final ‘products’ so overall I like the idea of the Deconstructing Circus Project. C’est tout.” **Olle Strandberg**

“The deconstruction interview you did on Gynoïdes Project has been very positive to me and the project. I must mention that you are a very good listener and that I feel you understood the essence of the project.

The repercussions of this article are positive both for me for having done this exercise with you, but also in terms of marketing; it has increased the visibility of the project online and I use this link in my portfolio, on my website, and in numerous grant applications.

The link to the article was shared and recommended in Danstidningen Magazine in Sweden, which refers to your magazine as a thrilling (or fantastic) online circus magazine: <http://www.danstidningen.se/2014/02/20/danstidningen-nr-1-2014-ute-nu/>” **Marie-Andrée Robitaille**

“The Deconstructing Circus interview was extremely positive and productive. Creating a resource like this for the community is something no one else has done, and on such a large scale as well. As artists the most important thing we have is our process. Process is also the number one thing no one ever talks about since it is so personal. To me it is the

only thing worth talking about and Deconstructing Circus gets right to the heart of the matter.

The interview let me question my work through new eyes, and reading all the other interviews also made me consider new questions for my work. The web archive will not only allow me to show others how a contemporary circus creation works, but will certainly give me credibility within these discussions in other contexts.

I don’t know if it’s possible to criticize the project so far as it’s the only one I know of its kind with nothing to compare it to. Perhaps I can only find suggestions of where the work might go in the future, though there are so many paths. I found the selection of who was interviewed to be slightly random, though again this has its strong points as well. Maybe if the project were to happen again there could be more pointed context given to who was interviewed... maybe even in terms of scale from the market: small company, medium size company, large company. Or then laid out by venue type/size or something like that. As well two artists could be interviewed at the same time, or then interview each other about the same subjects, so that an even more immediate comparison of process details can be seen.

Overall I’m proud and honored to be involved in this project, and I hope this will add to the momentum that finally gets circus journalism on the map!” **Jay Gilligan**

“My main point on this is that it is great to treat Circus with the same degree of detailed analysis which is given to Dance, Theatre or indeed Cinema. With some of the reactions

which we still get from our shows it seems apparent to me that Circus is still largely considered as the ‘desert’ of the arts, the cuddly poetic art form. I think your putting parts

of the work under the microscope is helping change this.” **Sean Gandini**

CONTRIBUTORS

“The first thing I thought when you wrote to me was that this was a great idea. I’ve been particularly interested in creation processes for a long time, so it was an opportunity to know better the work of circus artists. The format of the article was a challenge, though. I do prefer to let the artist talk, but my first impression was that I needed to provide some ‘external’ or ‘neutral’ information: how is the whole show organized, how does it flow, how does the selected scene work with all the rest, etc. But I also guessed this format would raise the artists’ work – that it could be a good way to see how deep they go to set up a show. Especially accompanied with the video excerpt of the show. For me, it works perfectly.

Useful or not? I’d say it is. In my experience, I know circus artists aren’t great readers, though they read more now than they did some years ago. This is probably because of the influence of circus schools and the exchange with artists coming from other disciplines. Also because all the time there are more texts and books on circus creation with which they can establish a mutual feedback. Therefore I believe it’s useful for circus artists AND for writers and reviewers, and for linking circus with other forms of art as well – which is an important issue in my view.” **Cesc Martinez**

“I personally found it extremely interesting as an approach and it was a great experience for me. The research before, the possibility to discuss such detailed things with the directors, etc. As for the writing – I found it inspiring. Of

course it was not always easy, because artists are always a bit afraid of deconstructing their piece, but I think in the end everybody found it interesting (it was funny to watch Antoine Rigot and Bernard Kudlak lose themselves in reflection as they looked for the answers to my questions). For me personally it was hard to choose what to use after the interview, but that probably comes more easily with more experience. As to what I heard from artists and other readers, they found the concept original and helpful. Especially the fact that there is a video and the interview is mostly about it.” **Mara Pavula**

“I found the project enriching for me and for the artists/directors as well – this format of interview was more comfortable than asking a lot of questions and forcing them to answer all of them. [...] I appreciate the focus of the project – contemporary circus directors and their work. It is one of the most important topics now, especially in the Czech Republic – it was a good way to analyse in detail the performance and, as I saw it, it also helped the directors to think about their work differently.” **Veronika Stefanova**

INCOME

Arts Council England Grant	£5,625
Private Income	£1,800
In-kind: 3 days Interviewing/Writing from Bauke Lievens(KASK)	£675
In-kind: Marketing Support from Circus Magazines	£665
TOTAL	£8,765

EXPENDITURE

19 Days Work for Conducting / Transcribing Interviews	£4,275
6 Days Work Editing / Uploading / Site Development	£1,350
11 Commissions to Conduct / Transcribe Interviews	£2,475
Marketing	£665
TOTAL	£8,765

NOTES

* As mentioned earlier in this document, I should have included travel and accommodation in the budget and in the end received support from Festival CIRCa in France and Subtopia in Sweden. The value of this was probably something like £500-600.

* I based the writing/editing fees on £225 p/d, which is the suggested minimum of the Society for Editors and Proofreaders. As part of the evaluation I asked the project contributors how they felt about the fee they were paid. No one complained about it being too low, but they also all said that the work took more hours than I thought it would (usually about twice as much). I think people are used to being underpaid as writers.

AP.4 HOURS WORKED

ADMIN 34 HOURS

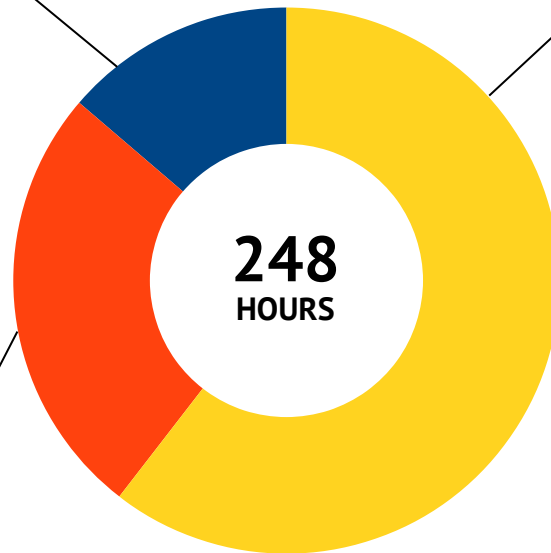
Administrative e-mails with contributors and interviewees; project planning; marketing and evaluation.

CORE WRITING AND EDITING 150 HOURS

Interviewing, transcribing, editing interviews; website work; e-mailing back and forth with interviewees; video editing.

WORKING WITH CONTRIBUTORS 64 HOURS

Editing the interviews produced by the contributors; editing the accompanying video.



NOTES

* To reiterate one of the great themes of this evaluation: I underestimated the time that the work would take on almost every level. I worked around 35 days on the project – not counting any travel time – when I'd originally planned to work 25 and had only raised the money to be paid for 17. On a personal level I found it quite difficult to manage the workload and stay afloat.

* I didn't allocate enough time for conducting and editing the actual interviews, but there were also some things I simply didn't account for: planning the subjects of the interviews (I didn't budget time to work out who would be in the project, watch videos of shows, etcetera); lost time (there were a couple instances where I wanted to include a performance but after reviewing the material decided the video quality, i.e. the quality of the actual filming, wasn't good enough, or where an artist was interested in being involved but then the interview couldn't be scheduled); marketing and evaluating the project.

* The graph above just shows the hours I worked. Adding in the time the contributors spent on the project would probably bring the total to around 350 hours.

* I used the time management software Toggl to track the time I spent on Deconstructing Circus and to see how that time divided between different tasks. I'd recommend this software.



PS. EVALUATION OF EVALUATION

Filling in the Grants for the Arts application and being confronted with a box demanding an evaluation strategy was the first time I gave it any thought. I read through ACE's own notes on the subject and put something together based on that, but now feel like I should have been more systematic about collecting responses to the project – especially since, as mentioned in Appendix 1, the statistical measures are all quite flawed.

I had a lot of conversations with artists following the project but didn't have the where-withal or the plan in place to actually record these. I think in retrospect the thing to have done would have been to pick a few known readers and do more of a sit-down interview with them to draw out some detailed thoughts on the project.

So overall there were some things that went wrong, and some that went right, but I like finishing this reflection with the feeling that there are clear things I can improve on to be better next time.