The Economic Lives of Circus “Artists”: Canadian Circus Performers and the New Economy

Lindsay Katypana Stephens
University of Toronto

Abstract
This article, based on ethnographic research with Canadian circus performers, provides an intimate look into the lives of these creative workers. It contributes to the burgeoning literature on the creative economy by examining how ideas of “creativity” and “art” are being put to work in the lives of these performers, including the centrality of affective experiences like freedom and satisfaction, as well as the significance of particular relations of production in defining “art.” It reveals the way ideas of creativity and art can glamorize and promote precarity and simultaneously demarcate spheres of unalienated work. These findings suggest that workers, policymakers, and scholars could benefit from more conscientious use of these terms if we want to understand their impact or mobilize them for particular political purposes.

Keywords
Creative economy; Art; Labour; Ethnography; Neoliberalisms

Introduction
In November of 2009 the Canada Council for the Arts announced its recognition of “Circus Arts” as a distinct art form. This announcement opened the doors for circus performers to apply for grants from the Inter-Arts office under the title “Circus Arts” rather than fitting into categories such as dance and theatre. This change also gave credence to performers’ claims that what they do is art. The rise of the circus as an art form comes at the same time as creativity is being promoted as the heart of new sys-
tems of capital production and provides an excellent case through which to examine creative labour. The relationship between creativity and contemporary modes of production is well established (de Peuter, 2014). Gill and Pratt (2008) argue that cultural and creative workers “perhaps more than any other(s) ... symbolize contemporary transformations of work” (p. 2). Peck (2005) claims that “the insidious ‘scalar narrative’ of creativity has it that the bodies—or perhaps more accurately, the souls—of creative individuals have become the preeminent carriers of economic-development potential” (p. 765). Circus production, as we will see below, is poised at this intersection between art and labour, an art form that operates in many ways as a paradigmatic successful, flexible creative industry, and exploring its practices provides insight into changing models of production (Armstrong, 1996; Dowling, Nunes, & Trott, 2007; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008; Lazzarato, 2006; Peck, 2005).

This article is based on embodied ethnographic research with Canadian circus performers and contributes to scholarship on the creative economy by providing a uniquely intimate look into the lives of these creative workers. I have been working as a professional circus performer (aerialist and clown) before, during, and since the period of this research. As such I was able to utilize professional and personal connections and experience to train alongside, perform with, interview, and observe Canadian circus performers. As an embodied ethnography this research involved extensive physical and emotional participation, and attention to affective, not just intellectual data (Paterson, 2009; Turner, 2000), which made it ideal for exploring the pragmatic realities and affective motivations operating in the lives of these creative workers.

Growth in the centrality of ideas of creativity to capitalist production have led Virno (2004) and Lazzarato (2006) to suggest that we are seeing a melding of the spheres of art and work. Art and the artists who make it have long been what capitalism regarded as “the very paradigm of freedom, heterogeneity, difference and deviance” (Lazzarato, 2008, p. 1), but Lazzarato, Peck (2005), Gill and Pratt (2008), and others argue that art and cultural production are now the central site for control, corporate colonization, and capitalist production. They argue that creative labour has become the nerve centre of contemporary capitalism, that art and creativity can now be found at the heart of new systems of capital. My research into circus performers’ experiences supports this, suggesting that capitalist control and experiences of freedom are not opposed in the lives of these workers, but intertwined in complex ways. This article argues that the current dominance of ideas of art and creativity in the economic sphere is occurring in part because they describe powerful experiences that appeal to both workers and consumers. What is the role of desire and freedom in shaping and maintaining new systems of governance? If the appeal of freedom, power, and choice are under-theorized (Larner, 2003), then we are missing valuable information needed to understand the tenacity of neoliberalism and the success of post-Fordism, as well as the places where these systems may be vulnerable. Based on the case of circus performers, I argue that the ideology of creativity can function to glamorize precarity among some workers, through mobilizing ideas of artistic freedom. However, simultaneously it is used by artists themselves to defend and demarcate important spheres of satisfaction and autonomy in working life. This article explores these divergent func-
tions of the ideas of art and creativity in the lives of circus performers in an effort to better understand their appeal and growth.

I begin by looking briefly at the policy context within which Canadian artists are working. I then turn to the case of the circus to unpack some of the tensions, contradictions, and resourceful solutions found at the heart of this form of creative work in Canada today. I discuss how performers reinforce distinctions between art and other better paid less satisfying work, and explore what purpose these distinctions might have. I also explore the creation of collective responses to precarious conditions, which echo findings from research looking at artists in other sectors (Kern, 2013; McRobbie, 2011). Finally I use these insights to discuss the importance of critical, thoughtful engagements with the terms “creativity” and “art,” if we want to better understand their current social impact, or mobilize them for particular political purposes.

**Neoliberalism in the lives of Canadian artists**

The policy framework and social paradigm within which Canadian artists work has undergone a pendulum swing over the past 60 years. There is considerable evidence that the post-Fordist and neoliberal environments described by so many scholars (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Clark, 2002; Rantisi, Leslie, & Christopherson, 2006; Rose, 1996; Virno, 2004) are not just abstract notions but are operational in the lives of Canadian artists. Around the end of the 1950s, there was in Canada an increasing investment by the state in cultural life (art, film, media, etc.). The Canada Council for the Arts was founded in 1957 and the Ontario Arts Council in 1962. These councils were quite literally a Keynesian invention, being strongly based on the model of the Arts Council of Great Britain, which was set up by Maynard Keynes himself (Brighton, 2006). The arts council model was rooted in the idea that cultural policy should promote Canadian nationalism, and art was a public good that government should support. For a while in Canada this was the normative basis of the public’s relationship to art and culture, but these principals have since changed. Individual scholars periodize these changes differently (Edwardson, 2008; McCormack, 1984), but many discuss one of the key turning points as the release of the report of the Applebaum-Hébert Committee (*Report of the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee*, 1982), which signalled the movement of Canadian arts policy from a national and welfare policy model toward a marketized model (McCormack, 1984). At the time it was released, this report received significant backlash (McCormack, 1984), but after a few years its ideas formed the groundwork for a new-normal understanding of the relationship between art and the market. This became especially relevant in the context of ongoing divestment in these areas over the past 30 years, as state-led cultural investment has become more difficult due to deregulation and the growth of CUFTA (Canada–US Free Trade Agreement) and NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) (Goff & Jenkins, 2006).

Goff and Jenkins (2006) argue that in comparison to what they call “traditional” nationalist cultural policies in Canada (of which the Canada Council for the Arts is emblematic), most contemporary cultural policies focus on the “creative city.” This new model still receives funding from national and provincial sources, but also receives a lot more funding from private sources than the previous model. Within this shift, one of the most notable differences is the mobilization of cultural policy in service of
non-cultural goals, including economic goals. Léger (2010), when describing the most recent debate around cuts to arts funding in 2008, said:

What is clear from this debate is that it is virtually impossible for any of Canada’s political party leaders to construct a view of art’s social function other than as a gauge of economic productivity and competitiveness, on the one hand, or a cipher for liberal pluralism. (p. 562)

In addition to retrenchment of funding and a growth in interest in the economic value of art, we are recently seeing what appears to be a symbolic reinvestment in arts and culture. A new round of arts policies has been developed at the federal and provincial level over the past 15 years to concretize the “status of the artist” in Canadian society. The initial intention of this legislation, for which artist lobby groups like ACTRA (the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists) were advocating, was to empower artists to engage in collective bargaining, but this goal was not part of the final legislation. According to an interviewee at the Ministry of Culture in Ontario who worked on this legislation, the legislation that was finally passed was largely symbolic; it did not change any of the structural factors framing artists’ lives like tax policy or collective bargaining rules, and resulted in no new funding for artists. So while artists have been increasingly asked to value their work in economic terms, they are still not granted the rights and privileges of other workers. This means artists face a simultaneous erosion of their unique position as producers of non-economic value and exclusion from the possibility of stable relations of production found in more traditional forms of work. This policy approach seems to correspond to the experiences of performers, which I will discuss below. Their stories also suggest that the social status of art is being maintained or even increased, but this is paired with conditions of precarity, and a reduction in some of the desired aspects of art production such as autonomy and choice associated with changing production models.

Since arts policy in Canada happens at several levels of government, we cannot accurately talk about the policy environment for circus without acknowledging the unique case of Québec. Extensive support by the Québec government over the past few decades has nurtured a number of circus companies, such as Cirque de Soleil, Cirque Eloise, and Les Sept Doigts de la Main, to great popular and financial success (Jean-Arsenault & Darvida Conseil Inc., 2007). These companies and this policy environment spearheaded much of the growth of circus across Canada. Although some circus companies are experiencing economic success under the current policy paradigm, this would likely not have occurred without this prior government investment in the industry. A full analysis of the differences between these policy environs, especially in relation to the uptake of neoliberal approaches, is beyond the scope of this article and has been undertaken elsewhere (Gattinger & Saint-Pierre, 2010). For the purposes of this analysis it is sufficient to say that although Québec has taken a unique path, it has also been affected in recent years by the ideological and policy changes outlined in this article.

**New circus: A higher art?**

It is within this policy context that the Canada Council decided to grant “art” status to Canadian circus. It is a decision that fits comfortably within the current policy par-
adigm as it conveys status with no additional funding and also appears to reward a discipline that is doing relatively well financially. The decision arose largely in response to a transformation in circus as well as many years of lobbying from key figures in the Canadian circus community. Circus has experienced a revitalization in the past 30 years in Canada and abroad in large part due to the global success of the Canadian company Cirque du Soleil, but also evidenced by an explosion of smaller circus companies and entrepreneurial activity in this field (Albrecht, 2006; Babinski, 2004; Bolton, 1987; En Piste, 2011). Circus shows and acts created during this time are often called nouveau circus, new circus, contemporary circus, or reinvente. The most common way in which “new” circus is defined as distinct from the “old” circus is in the idea of increased artistry and a distinct break from more populist circus traditions of the past (Albrecht, 2006; Babinski, 2004; Bolton, 1987; Wall, 2013). Ernest Albrecht (2006), a circus aficionado and popular historian, describes the new circus as follows:

In addition to all the artistry seen in the various displays of skill, the physical trappings of the performances are extraordinarily tasteful, stylish, and elegant. Nary a sequin or spangle is to be seen in any costumes, which depend instead on fabric, drape and detailing for their effect, even the color palette is restrained. (p. 16)

Albrecht among others argues that the “new circus” incorporates more elements of theatre and dance (typically considered “higher” arts) and raises circus to the level of art. This shift elevates circus according to the discourse separating high from low or mass culture, which was central to European thought by the twentieth century (Hutnyk, 2006). Much of this transition toward more artistic performance gained traction first in Europe, where the trend has been toward performances in theatres, while American circuses were still going strong in tents (Stoddart, 2000). This trend has spread, and major growth in new circus has also arisen in Québec, across Canada and in the United States.

Somewhat in contrast to ideas about the “elite” appeal of art, Circus is also experiencing great popularity among audiences. According to En Piste, a circus advocacy organization in Québec:

[Although] the total number of performances for all performing arts dropped by 5.4% between 2003–04 and 2004–05, the number of circus and magic shows increased significantly by 64.9% during this same period. Along with song (3.8% increase), this was the only performing arts sector that experienced an increase in performances during the reference period. (Jean-Arsenault & Darvida Conseil Inc., 2007)

Although Québec data is not directly comparable to the rest of the country since Cirque du Soleil’s presence strongly influences the findings, based on my research, there is little doubt that circus is also experiencing strong growth in other parts of the country. Eli Chornenki, who runs Zero Gravity Circus, the largest circus entertainment company in Toronto, says he has seen a tenfold growth in the circus industry in the 10 years he has been in business in Toronto. This is growth in the number of circus-based companies (from 1 to 9 or 10) and number of performers (for example, from about 5 aerialists...
to about 40), and also growth in demand for circus entertainment (E. Chornenki, 2011, personal communication). This growth is not only in the form of large-scale circus shows, but also in a new model of circus production, the “custom” circus. This model operates by hiring circus performers and troupes on an as-needed basis, in formats tailored to particular clients or events such as Christmas parties, galas, and weddings.

It is this new model of production, combined with its new artistic status, that makes circus a particularly interesting site for asking questions about contemporary creative industries. Circus production embodies the kind of self-sufficient entrepreneurial approach to production that is desirable in the current economic paradigm (mobile, economically viable, and experienced at marketing, entrepreneurship, and financial independence). As Chornenki of Zero Gravity Circus said in an interview with the Globe and Mail:

> We’re a custom made-to-order kind of circus. We don’t build a show, put up a tent and sell tickets. That’s not the way our company has evolved. We work with clients who have something in mind and build the show the way they want it. … It’s a very flexible company. It’s the way a modern company has to run. I have a big Rolodex of people who are happy to come out and do shows with us. (quoted in Jermyn, 2011)

Performers are even encouraged to individually embody the idea of a flexible labour supply. They are financially rewarded for being able to fit themselves into a diverse range of sellable products, creating the ultimate flexible or niche product, and performing many of the features described as central to a post-Fordist approach to precarious work.

**How (not) to get rich quick**

Despite overall growth and relative success of circus as an industry, the circus performers I interviewed were clear about describing their work as “art,” and the most common way they explained this was by describing a lack of remuneration. Art was what performers said they did when they were not properly paid for their work. Art as a term was most commonly referred to in relation to discussions of financial arrangements around performance activities, and was most frequently used to explain a lack of money either in relation to particular gigs (shows) or in relation to performers’ overall financial stability. In this way, interviewees strongly upheld a dichotomy between art and other better-paid work. At least half the comments participants made about art referenced challenges in making a living, with art being positioned opposite financial stability—distinctly different from it, but still being defined in part by this relationship.

The clowns in particular described themselves as facing financial hardship. Kuchirka, a career clown who has toured around the world and been a regular character on a children’s television show, said it’s “hard to make your living as a clown. … You do what you have to do. … It’s all about survival” (Kuchirka, 2008, personal communication). Turner, who as one-half of one of the most popular clown duos in Canada Mump and Smoot, has “made it” as a clown, still said, “It’s brutal to be an artist in Canada” (Turner, 2008, personal communication). The tension between artistic and non-artistic work can be seen in a comment by Dagenais, a successful clown and head
of clown instruction at the National Circus School. He is well respected in his field, is offered a lot of work related to his expertise, and yet described how he must work relentlessly because none of those jobs pay him very much. He said:

I have to work a lot and at very different things: corporate work, workshops, theatre, clown, circus … to have all those, it’s always hard, I’m not doing publishing, I’m not doing movies. In 1975 I took the bad way, the artistic way. It was a bad decision but I have to live with it. (Dagenais, 2008, personal communication)

While sincere about working very hard and not making money easily, there was also something tongue-in-cheek about his description of the artistic way as the “bad way.” He appeared to simultaneously be expressing pride in his choices and presenting a lack of money as a validation of the artistic credentials of his chosen path.

Performers’ language and descriptions reveal complex ideas about art and work and the relationship between them. Despite Rancière’s (2004) and Lazzarato’s (2006, 2008) claims about the blurring of the boundary between art and work in the contemporary moment, this distinction is still very active in the language and lives of these performers and has power to shape choices and activities. Many performers were adamant about upholding this distinction in a way that seemed to indicate a refusal of work (in a Marxist sense); a moment of de-alienation of labour such as has been part of many other art practices like Dadaism and Surrealism, where the “ambiguous tension between aesthetic play and capitalist work meant that it was possible for the notion of art as play to be reactively articulated against work” (Grindon, 2011, p. 83). In this way the differentiation between art and work marked important zones of autonomy around at least some aspects of circus performance, and distinctly divided different experiences within it.

Performers I spoke with were quite clear about when they were doing “shitty corporate work” and when they were not. Performers describe taking on what they consider to be non-artistic performance jobs because they need money (these include birthday parties, clubs, and corporate shows). “Corpos” or “corporates,” as they are sometimes called, are relatively well paid gigs for private and corporate clients at a range of venues such as nightclubs, private homes, convention centres, and public spaces, and these were essential to making a living as a performer. Carroll, a successful Montréal aerialist who has been performing for 20 years, described this division in circus performance very clearly. She discussed the availability of corporate work as relatively new in the circus world. She said that now

[t]here is the whole corpo scene, which really didn't exist before, where people can do gigs for corporate parties, for companies and things like that. … I think partly because of Cirque du Soleil it became really trendy to have circus acts and to have the sort of artsy Cirque kind of acts so a lot of corporations wanted to have Cirque acts in their shows, and so people can really make a living doing “corporates,” as we call them. And that again is sort of in some ways a shame because I don't really think of that as the artistry of the whole thing, which is something I am more interested in. …
What happens is people are creating acts to sell to a client who doesn't know what they are talking about, and so you need punchy music or something that looks really like something they have already seen. Often they don't have any imagination and so it's not necessarily a good thing. (Carroll, 2008, personal communication)

In this text you can see the tension around the idea of art quite clearly. Carroll uses words with the root “art” in two very different ways. She distinguishes between “artsy” and “artistry.” In this description the difference between these terms lies in whether the performer has to meet a client’s demands, whether they are expected to please people who have “no imagination” and want to see something “that looks like something they have already seen.” To Carroll and other performers artistry is clearly desirable and “more interesting,” and yet difficult to achieve when doing “corpos” because the paycheck requires the performer to meet the client’s expectations, in this case for “punchy” music and familiarity, which involves achieving a “Cirque-like” aesthetic (referring to the style of Cirque du Soleil).

We can see that the borders of what is considered to be art are clearly operational among performers and are in part self-policed. However, determining precisely when artistic integrity has been compromised can be difficult. In some instances any financial success is a sign of a problem. Turner of Mump and Smoot said, “You have these weird perceptual changes that happen—as soon as you sell more than 100 seats, you’ve sold out” (Turner, 2008, personal communication). With notions of artistic integrity linked so closely to lack of financial success, contradictions can arise, as the same work might be called art or selling out, depending on how many people buy tickets. Again we see judgment of financial success connected to the increasingly desirable category (among circus performers) of art, and a valorization of remaining in precarious conditions despite the recognition that such conditions are not sustainable.

**What is art and why do they do it?**

Despite strong arguments about the differences between the artistic and corporate work, the logic of these distinctions was not always straightforward. According to interviewees, the same activities were sometimes understood as meaningful art and sometimes as alienated work depending not on the content of the work itself, but on factors like location and remuneration. While money was central, it was not just financial lack that defined art. A performance was considered art if it complied with hierarchies of taste that included preferred types of movement, preferred modes of presentation, preferred styles of costume, preferred locations or staging, and preferred aesthetic experiences. In each category there were a range of possible creative choices, some of which were interpreted as better or more artistic than others, often depending on who was judging them and in what context. It is part of the circus performer’s expertise to be able to perceive and negotiate these differences, even though they are not always straightforward.

Preferred types of movement were sometimes described as affective or emotional rather than “just technical” movement—“dance” rather than “tricks.” Ideally a performer does not just achieve a position, but emotes through the position, makes the movement meaningful by having appropriate facial and other corresponding physical
expressions. Of course, performers did not always agree about which movements qualified as artistic, for example, pointed toes are traditionally seen as central to an aesthetically pleasing line, but could also be seen as un-artistic compared to the more unusual flexed foot, which some consider more unexpected and expressive. We can see Bourdieu's (1984) distinctions of taste at work in this discourse: cultural capital specific to those inside this community is required to identify whether any particular flexed foot is an ugly mistake or a deliberate aesthetic provocation.

Performers and audiences also express preferences for styles of costumes that contribute to the assessment of whether a performance can be called art. As with movement, while costuming was felt to be an important indicator of whether something was artistic, what made it so was not universal. A style that one person felt was artistic was not necessarily deemed to be so by another. “Artistic” costuming could range from plain cotton bloomers or jeans and T-shirts to lace and sequin negligee or individually designed leotards. Again the specifics of what was considered artistic could vary quite significantly.

Location also contributed to whether something is perceived as artistic. Georgopoulous, a successful Toronto-based aerialist, said, “Clubs are my least favourite place to perform. They make you feel like you are being a decoration rather than doing art” (Georgopoulous, 2008, personal communication). Interestingly, she was often performing the same act in clubs as she was doing in other more “artistic” settings, but her experience of the meaning of the act was different in each location. Even national identity and geography contributed to deciphering different artistic preferences. Especially in Québec, performers remarked on the different aesthetic preferences found in European circus as compared to American circus (Canadian circuses could go either way). According to a few performers originally from Europe, the Continent has a history of smaller circuses that are autre (“alternative”), and Québec performers considered this more artistic. This style of circus was contrasted to Barnum & Bailey “American style” circus, which was felt to be less artistic.

All the performers agreed that generating some kind of emotional response in the audience, beyond or in addition to the wonder or fear created by circus tricks themselves, was a central aim of their work. Achieving this goal was not always easy. Performers overcame great odds to try to make this happen. This was a challenge especially among aerialists; for them, achieving emotional connection was often found to be at odds with the technical challenges of performance. For example, on an apparatus like swinging trapeze a lot of technique was required to complete the physical movements. Roberts, a Montréal-based swinging trapeze performer originally from Switzerland, argued that some apparatus are not conducive to the kind of emotional connection performers strive to achieve. He said:

For swinging trapeze it's really hard to have the connection. You have it but you don't feel it ... it's impressive because you fly. But you don't feel because you are so focused on what you do, and you don't see people look at you, or sometimes you try to do something artistic when you have time, but when you just do technique it's like [no feeling], and you just feel it when they are like (makes gasping sound). (N. Roberts, 2008, personal communication)
Within the range of ways performers sought to affect the audience, some experiences seemed to be more associated with being artistic than others, such as making the audience uncomfortable, rather than pleasing or entertaining them. Creating responses that were nuanced and not just happy was a highly sought-after goal. We can see echoes here of Kant’s (1914) descriptions of art, that the kinds of emotions that art inspires should be distanced from, and more meaningful than, regular pleasure. This desire to reach beyond pleasure also strongly evokes ideas of art as disruption, an event or a shock to thought, which has been part of contemporary conceptions of the role of art for Deleuze. For Deleuze the interesting and valuable aspect of art, found in such paintings as Francis Bacon’s *Scream*, was that it was a “violence of sensation” rather than a spectacle or a representation (Deleuze, 2003; Massumi, 2002). In fact for one circus performer, it was actual physical pain that characterized the distinction between art and corporate performance. Gulick, a Montréal-based aerialist, works on many different apparatuses, one of which is the Chains. Chains are just what they sound like, long loops of chain hanging from the ceiling that the performer uses to climb, wrap, and sometimes drop. Gulick indicated in our conversation that he saves the chains for his art numbers, knowing they will not be approved of or appreciated in most corporate environments:

> Corporate stuff pays a lot more so you do corporate stuff and then like if I’m working on a new number and it’s something crazy, I’ll do it, I’ll do free shows sometimes to work on something or fundraiser shows. They’ll be like “Oh, we need a fundraiser show,” and I’ll be like “Okay, I’ll do it, but I’m doing what I want to do, I’m not going to do something nice, it’s going to be weird or it’s going to be ugly or it’s going to be uncomfortable or I’m going to bleed. (Gulick, 2008, personal communication)

So particular aesthetic or content choices were often given as reasons to describe a performance as artistic, but the details of these choices could vary significantly between different performers and different audiences. There was significant consistency, however, when performers described the conditions under which they could best make these choices and the constraints that inhibited them. There were technical constraints, such as with swinging trapeze, and then there were constraints related to the relations of production—the expectations of clients and the environments of performance—and it is these latter constraints that seem most relevant to the issue of creative labour. The idea of finding places (like fundraisers and free shows) where the performer felt entirely unconstrained and able to fully express themselves was an important part of what it meant to be creative or artistic for these performers. Why is this particularly relevant now? If creative work is evaluated by an increase in corporate shows and economic success, as we have seen in the current policy paradigm, this could diminish the creative autonomy described as important to performers and central to their definitions of art.

It is not only the production model of one-off corporate shows that can constrain performances. For some performers, Cirque du Soleil’s larger-scale model for producing circus shows is also associated with creative limitations and restrictions. Calcutt, a long-time clown performer with Cirque du Soleil, described the process she went through...
re-negotiating the content of her act when she was pregnant. Typically Calcutt designs
and writes her own pieces, and she expected she would be able to continue to do so
during her pregnancy, adapting the act to respond to her changing body. She said:

It would be great if I could use it when I was pregnant. I thought I would
be in the show till I had the baby because I am the clown and who cares,
I’m not flying, and I was excited to make a new act. And even they were
concerned if I drink Scotch and I thought, Oh well, I should smoke too,
trailer trash. If you are going to say something you might as well say it ...
but no way no way no way. (Calcutt, 2009, personal communication)

According to Calcutt, Cirque was absolutely clear that even though she was the clown
in a show about sexuality and other taboo subjects, there were some things the com-
pany would not permit, such as acting like she was drinking and smoking while preg-
nant, or even being explicitly pregnant onstage. They were comfortable with the
boundaries of her act before the pregnancy and were not willing to change those to in-
corporate the new material she felt her pregnancy allowed her.

To summarize, the idea of art functioned among these performers as a way to
identify and valorize certain elements of their work that they felt were important, but
also to describe certain relations of production. Despite a range of different content
being considered artistic, performers consistently expressed that both the content and
satisfaction of creating within structures of “art” production was preferable to the ex-
perience of performance created under more typical labour relations, such as those
found in performing for corporate clients. When articulating the distinction between
doing art and doing corporate work, they described the latter as better paid but less
free, resulting in less satisfaction with the performances they created. They generally
advocated for the art model despite the benefits of doing corporate work, such as better
income and more regular employment.

What work is the idea of art doing in the contemporary moment?
Despite a great variety of content that counts as “art,” the descriptions performers gave
of the experience of freedom they associated with art corroborates research from other
creative industries. Gill and Pratt (2008) say:

One of the most consistent findings of research on work within the cre-
ative industries is that it is experienced by most who are involved with it
as profoundly satisfying and intensely pleasurable (at least some of the
time). A vocabulary of love is repeatedly evinced in such studies, with
work imbued with the features of the Romantic tradition of the artist, su-
fused with positive emotional qualities (von Osten, 2007). Research speaks
of deep attachment, affective bindings, and to the idea of self-expression
and self-actualization through work. Indeed, such characterizations are so
common that McRobbie (1998) argues that we might dub this kind of
labour ‘passionate work.’ (p. 15)

There is a long history of utopian ideas about art, with many theorists suggesting that
art is intrinsically political (Deleuze, 2003; Manning, 2006; Massumi, 2002; Toscano,
2009). But few of the theories of art being a liberatory practice are actually concerned
with the content of the art itself. What many of these theories focus on is the relation of art to other productive concepts like work. This focus is mirrored by my participants, who suggested that content was a secondary effect of the alternative relations of production that were permitted by the role of the performer as an artist.

Paulo Virno (2004) calls post-Fordism “the communism of capitalism” (p. 110), meaning that it offers many of the desirable things that communism has stood for (less alienation, greater fulfillment), but simultaneously fails to generate political equality or challenge the system of capitalism itself. In research on creative workers, scholars have found that “most workers, even those whose labour tends to be repetitive and generic, are to a large extent motivated by a notion of their work as self-expressive and self-actualizing” (Arvidsson, Malossi, & Naro, 2010, p. 297). This is certainly part of the discourse of circus performance. Chornenki of Zero Gravity Circus described how he thinks performers should regularly reinvent their shows and work to achieve their own sense of satisfaction and enjoyment, which coincidentally complements the desire of clients for flexibility and diversity. When we look at the experiences of creative workers, we have to consider that post-Fordism may actually be meeting and fulfilling some of the needs of workers for less alienation and greater fulfillment. If this is so, the question then becomes, what does this mean for how we think politically about relations of production?

As described above, the performers I spoke with often use the ideas of art and creativity as a justification or explanation for precarity, low income, and poor working conditions, but simultaneously as a way to defend or demarcate desired experiences of un-alienated or self-authored work. It is the simultaneousness of these two things, the connections between desire, choice, and precarity, which I think is key. In the case of Circus, the kind of precarity found in artistic and creative work is being frequently chosen because it makes performers feel less alienated and more passionate. As McRobbie (2011) suggests, perhaps these creative workers are “self-exploiting” based on finding pleasure in their work? When examined in relation to the changes we have seen in public discourse in Canada—symbolic investment in artists paired with cutting back resources and legislating expectations that artists justify their work in economic terms—it seems important to consider the consequences of the connections between creativity and precarity. Do ideas of creative labour cultivate the feeling that one is making choices and experiencing freedom, without increasing access to or awareness of political equality or rights? I cannot evaluate whether what we are seeing is a form of “false consciousness” in which performers are internalizing an external demand for versatility, or whether these practices are a true mobilization of satisfaction and desire to create new work, but I am not sure whether this distinction matters. With or without these labels, the motivation of self-actualization influences workers’ actions and experiences, and influences how they participate in systems of production.

If relations of art and labour are going to become more alike, then we need to be clear about which parts of each concept are being mobilized. If freedom and satisfaction is the chosen payoff for precarity, then is this payoff being delivered? In many cases what we see in the production of corporate work among circus performers is the precarity of artistic labour forms, without the freedom and autonomy that art is supposed to allow. We see flexibility of work conditions for employers without a compa-
rable flexibility of work content or control over relations of production for performers. In other words, we see the mobilization of desire for autonomy in work, in a way that paves the way for precarity, without the actualization of that desire.

**Alternative relations of production**

In addition to the degree of passion and feelings of choice that creative work appears to bring to the table, other elements of working in this model of production deserve a closer look. Given the retrenchment of more stable relations of production that occurs under many neoliberalisms, and which are standard in most creative labour, circus performers offer an interesting response. Exploring responses to precarity among non-standard workers has become central to the burgeoning literature on creative workers; for example, de Peuter (2014) thematized three different features of these collective responses. Many of these features of organizing are relevant and operational among circus performers as well, but the emotional and personal networks involved in this work were particularly apparent in this research.

Performers create their own mechanisms of stability and collective resource distribution, which makes surviving and even thriving in the instability of their working lives possible. Circus performers, despite often being in direct competition with one another for work, are strikingly helpful and supportive of each other. They frequently lend equipment, loan costumes, and share tricks and skills. They also exchange information about successful promotional strategies, sometimes sharing the cost of such strategies, like getting group deals on printing costs. They share important information about safety and insurance, and they pass along shows when unable to do them. Larger companies have even been known to lend their insurance (a holy grail in such a high-risk business) to smaller companies that have not been able to get their own. This is a situation that speaks to the generosity of people in the community, their commitment to improve the industry overall, but also to an awareness of their own vulnerability. In many ways this is an excellent and necessary solution to the precarity of this form of work.

However, surviving based on these kinds of informal networks requires intensive, complex navigation of relationships and unstated and shifting expectations. Unspoken rules of engagement for this kind of sharing include not poaching an agent contacted through another performer, generally returning “favours” such as passing along gigs to people who gave them to you, and not undercutting other performers by offering lower rates. The latter issue can be challenging given that there is less than perfect transparency about rates and contracts. Most importantly, accessing these kinds of supports is dependent on friendship networks and “getting along” with those who might help out. This dynamic can be one of the most challenging aspects of these kinds of unregulated business/friendship networks; it results in a blurring of emotional ties and business relationships. This aspect of the decrease in formal relations of production and increase in informal and affective relations of production should form a central theme in discussions about immaterial labour in a range of industries. When we discuss off-loading and downloading there is a corresponding conversation to be had about issues of emotional labour and the blurring of boundaries between personal and professional spheres in these forms of work.
All of these new ways of organizing provide a useful place to look for new possibilities for worker-friendly futures, and also to learn about the dangers and costs (many of them hidden in emotional labour) of this flexible new economy. Angela McRobbie (2011) has argued for a “renewal of radical social enterprise and co-operatives” (p. 33) among creative workers. This is inspiring, part of what de Peuter (2014) describes as the “perspective from below, affirming labour’s ability to collectively withdraw from and seek alternatives to the prevailing organization of work” (p. 265). But such a response can also be dangerous: if it simply encourages off-loading responsibilities for employment standards and safe working environments to workers themselves; if it fails to account for the burden of work on social life that can be generated by these conditions; or if it placates workers while more traditional structures of worker agency like unions are dismantled. Like other scholars, I am concerned that the term “creativity” may be used to explain instability, precarity, and low wages, describing and perhaps justifying those conditions through imbuing them with ideas of freedom and choice granted by the idea of art (Armstrong, 1996; Aronson & Neysmith, 1996; Dowling et al., 2007; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008).

What work could the term “art” do?
Self-conscious use of the terms “art” and “creativity” are increasingly important in scholarship and popular usage, especially given their recent expansion (Arvidsson et al., 2010; Lazzarato, 2008; Rancière, 2004). With this expansion, art and creativity are used to refer to so many things they can become slippery, almost treacherous concepts, suggesting something positive that may not match the reality the terms are describing. Also, the terms can undergo a simultaneous narrowing of meaning as people struggle to fit ideas of creativity into a particular model of economic production. Such shifts may change our opportunities for the use of these terms as productive concepts in the future. To avoid this we need a clearer articulation of the work that the terms “art” and “creativity” might be doing and a closer examination of what values they might be sheltering or upholding in particular situations.

Our tool kit is enlarged if we think of these terms not as describing a static reality, but rather as terms that do work, terms that describe certain relationships of production but which must be actively interrogated. We should continue to ask what exactly different people mean when they use the term “art” or “creativity.” Are they talking about certain kinds of produced content? Are they talking about particular relations of production? Are they talking about affective experiences that may be motivating choices? We should continue to ask pragmatic questions such as the following: What are the affective or aesthetic experiences that current relations of production or dominant market conditions do not encourage? Is the term “art” being used as a placeholder for values or experiences that live outside normative social relations and relations of production? Is it this possibility of “outside” status that gives art some value? Is this “outside” status still possible given the rapid pace at which we see creative, transgressive, and countercultural features being consumed and commodified? Given the way performers described art, the term may be providing shelter, however temporary and tenuous, from the effects of dominant discourses about economic value and even from the popularity of “creativity” as an economic development strategy. I
am not advocating a return to the generalized idea of art as utopian ideal, but rather am interested in the ways the term is being used as a practical descriptor for specific alternative models and relations of production that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Circus performers provide an excellent example of how these categories may be used in diverse ways for different political projects. As researchers we have some choices about how we want to put the term “art” to work (and under what conditions). If the instability and flexibility of post-Fordist relations of production is the most pertinent issue, then we should be distinctly skeptical of the perceived glamour in the flexibility of the artist’s life. The cachet of the artist fits too conveniently into relations of production that benefit from both precariousness and entrepreneurialism. We should be wary of the ways art is employed as a term to justify poor working conditions, or as a panacea for the erosion of labour standards and economic stability, and think instead about ways to interrupt the “ideology of creativity” (Arvidsson et al., 2010). However, if our main political or scholarly concern is the trend of increasing commodification, or the redefinition of human action as a form of the economic, then the idea of art might remain an important placeholder for “non-financial” values, and for affective experiences that are less immediately pleasurable and perhaps less marketable.

In order to operationalize the term “art” for different political ends, it is necessary to be clear which meanings of art we are invoking, and under what circumstances. Continuing to ask detailed intimate questions about what we mean by art and creativity and how different workers are using these terms will greatly enhance debates and discussions about post-Fordism and the creative city. Examining the actual experiences of performers gives us insight into the gap between the sexy image of flexibility and marginality associated with art and the reality that living in this way is precarious and limiting in its own right due to constraints of lack of stability, certainty, and money.

If we are to assess what work the term “art” might be doing, or be able to do, we have to look realistically at what it is allowing and what it is obscuring in specific cases. This is what I have tried to do in this article by looking closely at the working and affective experiences of circus performers. Further explorations of this nature may help to decipher the differences between art as panacea and art as transformative practice, and answer questions about the forces shaping and resisting contemporary models of production.

Notes
1. Although not often discussed together in current literature, this article puts the terms “art” and “creativity” into conversation with one another. “Creativity” has been the subject of an explosion of popular and scholarly interest, most often used to refer to the innovative and imaginative parts of production (Currah, 2009; Runco, 2004). However, it was the term “art” that was most commonly used by participants in this research to refer to the elements of creativity and originality in circus performance. Both terms have been subject to significant debate about when and how they should be used, and what actually counts as creativity (Cunningham & Higs, 2009; Currah, 2009; Runco, 2004) or art (Becker, 1978; Bourdieu, 1993; Dorn, 2004; Tolstoy, 1960). This article is not starting with a singular definition of either creativity or art, but rather offers empirical data and discussion about how these terms are currently being put to work in and around the lives of particular creative workers.

2. This research was focused in Toronto and Montréal, with two interviews in Edmonton and one in Las Vegas, and my interviewees were some of the key figures in this national and international community. I conducted a select sample of 26 key informant interviews and had one focus group with
10 aerialists. I also gathered a textual/visual archive that was closely intertwined with my participant observation. Participant observation included training two to four times weekly at a circus gym in the east end of Toronto, taking part in four clown workshops (3- to 16-day intensives), attending community meetings, taking classes, and designing shows with other performers. I worked on approximately 200 circus performance events from 2006 to 2011 and saw over 60 shows: theatrical clown shows, clown cabarets, student shows, cabaret shows with circus acts, and full touring circus shows.  

3. ACTRA, the Alliance of Canadian Cinema Television and Radio Artists, is arguably the largest, most powerful union for performance artists in Canada. Runners-up are Equity (representing theatre artists) and the DGC (Directors Guild of Canada, representing writers and directors).

**Personal communication**

Calcutt, S. (2009, March 27). *Personal communication.* Las Vegas, NV

Carroll, S. (2008, October 21). *Personal communication.* Montréal, QC

Chornenki, E. (2011, June 22). *Personal communication.* Toronto, ON

Dagenais, Y. (2008, October 19). *Personal communication.* Montréal, QC


Gulick, J. (2008, October 19). *Personal communication.* Montréal, QC

Kuchirka, G. (2008, June 28). *Personal communication.* Toronto, ON


Turner, J. (2008, February 12). *Personal communication.* Edmonton, AB

**References**


