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PERFECTING THE IMPERFECT: PARALLELS BETWEEN THE CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS ARTIST'S EMBODIMENT AND THE WESTERNIZED WABI SABI CONCEPT

39

• PERFECTING THE IMPERFECT: PARALLELS BETWEEN THE CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS ARTIST'S EMBODIMENT AND THE WESTERNIZED WABI SABI CONCEPT

Summary. Wabi Sabi is a Japanese concept that, despite lacking a universal definition, comprises three principles: nothing is perfect, nothing is finished and nothing lasts forever.¹ While in 2018, an adapted version of Wabi Sabi started to become trendier in the Western world², this Westernized concept accidentally starts to have parallels with the way in which contemporary circus artists experience their embodiment. The research showed that contemporary circus artists are constantly trying to focus more on what a body can do and how it can do instead of body appearance, they are accepting that bodies are not perfect and share an understanding of the importance of embracing this imperfection. Moreover, contemporary circus artists are having in mind constant bodily changes and reflecting it correspondingly by developing positive relationships with their bodies. This article will be a sociological outlook of interconnections among the already existing beliefs in the contemporary circus field and the new trend of Westernized Wabi Sabi ideas.

Keywords: contemporary circus, circus body, embodiment, Wabi Sabi.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant dates in the history of the circus is 1768, when the modern circus was created by the Astley family and from when the circus started to be recognized as an art form. After almost 200 years of various vicissitudes of being marginalized and living through the golden age of an art form, in the 1970s a significant change happened again. Although there were constant updates during the last long period of the circus' existence, the 1970s are considered significant for the emergence of the contemporary circus.

First of all, many circus researchers consider the 1970s as a mark until when the circus is considered *traditional* or evolving *postanimal*³ and later *modern*⁴, or until 2000⁵ *nouveau cirque* (*new circus*) and after 2000 *contemporary*.⁶ The circus of the 20th century's first quarter is divided into traditional and contemporary. A misconception appears when the word "contemporary" not only underlines the period but also is a name for the subgenre. As a result, it is a difficult term because all the circus created currently can be called likewise. Correspondingly, the traditional circus nowadays is

undeservedly associated with the old historical circus, although it has changed significantly. Because of this, as opposed to the traditional circus, the contemporary circus is often mistakenly evaluated as a more perfected version. It is often wrongly assumed that the contemporary circus consistently abandons all kinds of misogyny, xenophobia, and exploitation of people and animals in various ways, while the traditional one keeps all this within itself. This unfavourable comparison exists, but the differences are far more complex, and it is not right to distinguish genres of the circus by simply deciding which one is more perfect.

While the circus is an extremely physical art form, not considering all the exceptions, it is not possible to talk about it without mentioning the bodies of the artists. However, constant relearning to use one's body is an endless work in the contemporary circus, where mastering one apparatus or discipline is no longer enough.⁷ While circus practitioners can be considered athletes, their constant improvement is not in following goals, as in sports, but more in relation to expanding creative tools and their physical capabilities. Most aspects of work in a contemporary circus artist's life are soaked in the

idea of perfection. It is still important to improve bodily skills nearly to the perfect level of their performances, or just simply find the circus discipline perfectly fitting their body potential. Nevertheless, contemporary circus artists are aware of this perfection ephemerality, and express this acknowledgement of non-fixed skills and constantly changing body in very close parallel to ideas of the Wabi Sabi concept.

The Wabi Sabi concept as an aesthetic-ethical category that descends from medieval times of traditional Japanese culture is strongly connected to Zen Buddhism and the tea ceremony.⁸ The concept embraces not only the idea of admitting your imperfection, but also welcoming continuous learning and never-ending change without a need to reach the perfect end. According to Łaziuk,⁹ an adapted version of Wabi Sabi started to trend in the Western world in 2018, and the most significant difference in the Westernized concept is focusing on accepting imperfection in ourselves, rather than in the surrounding world. Following this, it is possible to see that this is a topic widely discussed in sociology and in multidisciplinary circus research.

This Westernized concept accidentally starts to have parallels with the way how contemporary circus artists are experiencing their embodiment. The research showed that contemporary circus artists are constantly trying to focus more on what a body can do and how it can do it, instead of on body appearance. Most of the work in a contemporary circus artist's life is based on aspiring to perfection. These artists accept that bodies are not perfect and share an understanding of the importance to embrace this imperfection. This article will be a sociological outlook of interconnections among the already existing beliefs in the contemporary circus field and the new trend of Westernized Wabi Sabi ideas. It is important to state that there will not be an analysis of any quality or aesthetical aspects of contemporary circus performances. The empirical data, the newest research insights on this topic, and sociological theories, will help to uncover parallels between the contemporary circus artist's embodiment and the Westernized Wabi Sabi concept.

SOCIOLOGICAL THOUGHT ABOUT EXPERIENCING BODY

Sociology analysing the body not only rejects Cartesian dualism between body and mind, but, according to Nettleton,¹⁰ the phenomenological approach allows us to reject dualism on various levels between culture and nature, rationality and emotionality, knowledge and imagination.¹¹ As a result, it can be said that all human cognition is understood or perceived through the body, because our senses do not exist apart from our bodies, which are rather overlapping than glued together with the senses.¹²

Hence, Merleau-Ponty¹³ was critical of the legacy of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* that became the foundation of the dualism between mind and body. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the *lived body* was presented and developed by applying Edmund Husserl's phenomenology to intentional consciousness, but from the perspective of corporeal existence.¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty,¹⁵ by rejecting behavioural and mechanistic approaches, argued that the body is both subject and object, and that we not only have a body but that we are the body. Researching embodiment means precisely looking at how "*object body is actively experienced produced, sustained and/or transformed as a subject body*".¹⁶ According to Byczkowska,¹⁷ when we study the body, we should have in mind that embodiment is a "subjectively experienced phenomenon". Therefore, bodily experiences cannot be taken for granted, they are never objective and not unchangeable.

Post-essentialists inspired by Nietzsche developed a new approach rejecting the idea of the ideal truth of the body, so the body, not fully rejecting nature and social laws, *is seen as always open to history and culture, always negotiable*, actively experienced and changing.¹⁸ These ideas are expressed in theories of *cultural studies, feminism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism*.¹⁹

According to Johnston,²⁰ following Sheets-Johnstone's *The Primacy of Movement*,²¹ when we give meaning to something, the movement of the body

is very important: *[w]e literally discover ourselves in movement. We grow kinetically into our bodies. <...> In our spontaneity of movement, we discover arms that extend, spines that bend, knees that flex, mouths that shut, and so on. We make sense of ourselves in the course of moving.*

According to Žukauskaitė,²² Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the Body without Organs (BwO) developed from Artaud's idea, has been extremely useful in exploring how bodies "un-do" themselves or "un-do" the idea of how bodies must be lived in and how they should be presented.²³ Abrahamsson and Simpson²⁴ argue that limits are imposed on our bodies, so through socialization, a person learns what one can do, although the limits of the body can be redrawn and delimited.

CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS BODY

Working in a circus is creatively working with the knowledge of one's boundaries and limitations of the body and constantly overcoming those by re-creating the impossible.²⁵ While people unquestioning the most of social and cultural limiting ideas of what a body can do, contemporary circus artists are constantly disagreeing with those limits. Circus challenges beliefs of normality and normalization about gender norms, and different abilities by demonstrating the remarkable capabilities of any body.²⁶ These artists are inspired to break bodily boundaries, play with them and make the impossible happen by creating and recreating rules.²⁷ The circus bodies are confronting not only body limits but also expected limitations towards certain types of bodies. The circus researcher and practitioner Seymour²⁸ shares her own experience: *In my own experience as an aerialist, reviewers and the public initially expressed politely surprised appreciation of the fact that "such a short woman" can exhibit strength and skill.*

Understanding body experience is crucial for the analysis of the circus body.²⁹ Hence, the embodiment of working in the contemporary circus is framed by practically never reaching the final

physical or creative goal, there is always something to be perfected, to be reached further. The unavoidable part of creating and being a circus body is also related to the exceptional focus, discipline of movement and dealing with pain as well as questioning risk.³⁰

Often, circus artists' work is seen as very risky, but many of the risky states that the artists' bodies fall into have been rehearsed many times. Moreover, serious accidents during a performance happen more often because of the apparatus or other staff mistakes, but very rarely because of the artist's physicality.³¹ The performance is a result of bodily movements that are already known, of all the tricks that are already doable and possible. Even though some tricks are incredibly fascinating they can be repeated again and again during further performances.³² Therefore, circus performances are nothing like sports championships when somebody is reaching their own or the ultimate record, but they are still not sure how it will go.

Although in contemporary circus, a large part of the work consists of physical preparation, the creative part is no less important. Contemporary circus performers do not even always have to be highly physically fit, as they can be masters but not necessarily show their virtuosity in performance. In the contemporary circus, there are more opportunities for different bodies to adapt, discover their discipline, and choose to work more physically or creatively. However, if we compare nowadays with the 1970s when contemporary circus started as a new circus form, the standard of the skill level was not as high as it is now.³³ Due to this, artists nowadays are confronting pressure, not specifically to show their virtuosity during the shows, but still to be able to master a lot of skills. However, not only personal stressors but also competitive and organizational stressors are making an impact, while there is no research to explain their effect.³⁴

Nevertheless, to become a contemporary circus artist there are several paths; staying in the circus at a professional level means being able *"to integrate high levels of muscle strength, extreme ranges of*



Fig. 1. Contemporary circus performance *Breast in peace* by M.P.A.C Mighty Performing Arts Collective (SE) in contemporary circus festival HELIUM, Vilnius, 2022. Photo by Dainius Putinas

movement and artistic expression while performing in high stress environment”.³⁵ Hence, circus artists’ efficacy in processing negative emotional states is aided by their higher-than-average levels of psychological resilience.³⁶ Despite that, circus artists’ emotional state of depression is similar to findings among a sample of elite athletes, but stress level comprehensively is even greater. Moreover, anxiety levels are lower compared with other performing artists but physical and mental demands intensively associated with circus may affect the mental health of artists the same as athletes,³⁷ so contemporary circus artists’ mental health is lower than in the general population, despite the higher reported resilience. The research done by van Rens and Heritage³⁸ shows that professional circus artists are also more resilient, because less resilient artists are inclined to leave the circus field.

Kralj³⁹ argues that all circus artists are still struggling with their physique. In general, working in the circus remains physically demanding, it requires physical strength, endurance, etc. These features are not classified as a traditional quality of femininity, so in the dual understanding of gender,

female circus artists outright become outside the norm.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Funk⁴¹ argues that in France, circus coaches refer differently to male and female bodies. Following Funk,⁴² Garcia⁴³ argues that it is often that male bodies are described as “workable, teachable”, while the female body is defined as “permanent”, therefore, female circus artists are more encouraged into a discipline that meets a preconceived idea of where her body fits, not often following the student’s aspirations as it is for male circus artists.

Relearning to use one’s body is also a constant task in the contemporary circus, where mastering one apparatus or discipline is no longer enough.⁴⁴ Circus practitioners who become experts of some skill no longer need to do new modifications, they are training more for maintaining physical form, except again when they are learning a new skill. Contemporary circus artists are distinguished by their flexibility in changing their skills.⁴⁵ Constant improvement in contemporary circus exists because of the strong connection between virtuosity and risk, which is why contemporary circus practices are not limited to already-mastered tricks,



Fig. 2. Arno Ferrera and Gilles Polet performing contemporary circus performance *CUIR* in contemporary circus festival “Cirkuliacija”, Kaunas, 2022. Photo by Donatas Ališauskas

but are characterized by innovation and creativity, where virtuosity and skill of performing tricks is not the main element.

COMPARISON OF TRADITIONAL AND WESTERNIZED WABI SABI CONCEPTS

Wabi Sabi doesn't have a direct translation because of its ambiguity, and has no universal definition in the Japanese language.⁴⁶ Wabi Sabi is still a more oral term, that does not commonly exist in written language. Also, while these two words eventually came together in an expression, for a long time they were separate terms.

When modern Japanese culture was being formed, the word *Wabi*, from the negative meaning of loneliness and poverty, started to be associated with Zen monks' ascetic tradition of solitary living accompanied by nature.⁴⁷ Hence, the word *Wabi* was used to describe a type of specific solitude, but through the years its meaning transformed into describing something beautifully imperfect, simple

and peaceful. It is about accepting reality without despair, as in a colloquial saying: “it is what it is”.⁴⁸

The second word of this concept *Sabi* emerged also from Zen Buddhism, and from meaning negative things like something is often damaged or withered, over time its meaning changed to “a positive connotation, and today *Sabi* means the beauty and calm brought to us by a certain age or experience.”⁴⁹ It is more about understanding and accepting the way things change by growing and decaying.⁵⁰

Łaziuk⁵¹ says that, even though Wabi Sabi in the Western world was episodically appearing earlier, 2018 could be called “the year of wabi-sabi”. Sometimes this concept is usually compared to Swedish *lagom*, Chinese *feng shui* or Danish *hygge*, and also can be understood as a philosophy as well as a trend in design.⁵² According to Americanist Łaziuk⁵³, as a design trend, Wabi Sabi is likely to end as fast as the others. Nevertheless, the philosophical part of this concept can be oppositional and healthy for Western culture of neoliberal freedom of perfected consumerism.⁵⁴

According to Łaziuk,⁵⁵ while talking about Wabi Sabi it is possible to see similarities and differences between traditional and Westernized concepts. First of all, the difference is that Westernized Wabi Sabi is understandable and applicable to everyone, while the original perspective is possible only for people with specific skills and knowledge. In the Westernized understanding of Wabi Sabi, it is possible to see similarities with mindfulness, and it is even applied as a different type of minimalist movement with similar ideas to DIY or DIT cultures for appreciating already used, not massively produced things. The other crucial difference is that in Japanese culture Wabi Sabi, existing for several centuries and occurring in many artistic fields like *kintsugi*, and tea ceremonies, while the Westernised term is not related to any kind of art form.⁵⁶ There is also a different perception of nature in these concepts: while in Japanese culture, nature historically was part of the national identity, in the West, “*nature was more perceived as an obstacle to development*”.⁵⁷ The understanding of imperfection is also different: the Japanese concept is more about accepting imperfection in the surrounding world, not necessarily in ourselves, while the Western interpretation is the opposite – firstly focusing on accepting personal imperfection.

Łaziuk⁵⁸ also exclude similarities between Westernized and Japanese concepts. In both cultures, the term does not have a universal definition. Another common thing is aesthetical ideals. Both concepts follow the ideas of accepting time’s influence on everyone and everything, as well as the beauty of imperfect irregularity and positive thoughts towards the impossibility of being fully complete.⁵⁹ The following of perfection in any direction in a person’s life could be a lack of flexibility, because there is always room for more. As Suzuki⁶⁰ says, accepting the imperfection of life frees a person from an unhealthy relationship based on self-demand, when everything eventually becomes outdated or obsolete.

Kempton⁶¹ finishes the book about Wabi Sabi by giving a present of an imaginary amulet on which it is written “*You are perfectly imperfect, just as you*

are.” The written words on this imaginary gift to a reader are very alike what kind of thought contemporary circus artists are using to describe their relationships with their own bodies.

METHODOLOGY AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The qualitative research about contemporary circus artists’ embodiment happened in two periods. Twenty-seven contemporary circus artists participated. The main semi-structured interviews were collected from 2021 October until 2022 January, and additional interviews happened in 2022, from March until August. Moreover, 19 women and 8 men professional artists participated intensively working in the contemporary circus field from 8 different countries. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 47 years. Most of the interviews were done via Zoom, Skype and Messenger video call.

The first stage of interviewing focused on questions about the field, as well as at the same time participating in the local field by watching shows, following news and communicating with the field operators. The second part of the interviewing was mostly for collecting more interviews and saturating the data as well as practically trying circus lessons. However, in this article, there will be no review of the analysis made from the researcher’s reflective diary made during participant observation, and the focus will be only on the empirical data of the semi-structured interviews.

These interviews with contemporary circus artists unfolded how they experience their embodiment. The research showed that contemporary circus artists focus not on the body’s looks but on what it can do; this goes to the next level, where it is far more important how a body can do specific things. Also, the theme of constantly changing bodies is significant. The artists share their thoughts on how they are dealing with imperfections and not fixed skills, as well as how they manage to stay in positive relationship with their bodies.

FROM HOW IT LOOKS TO HOW IT DOES: THE WAY OF ACCEPTING IMPERFECTION

The contemporary circus as a performing art field most of the time presents artists' bodies on stage doing art, leading to evaluation of a person in relation to body appearance. In the circus, there is the constant presence of the body in the relationship with the audience and with others that forces the artists to enter a position where their bodies are constantly observed and they are evaluated according to their bodies' appearance.

There's always this estimation from outside, from the public or from the colleagues... they look at you and they look at your body and kind of like, you know, somehow value it or not, or if it's right, or if it's strong...

(Riita, 47 years, Finland)

However, the artists notice this situation in which the body is under constant attention, and they try to discuss the issue. Although artists felt pressure to look a certain way, they said that they learnt or are still trying to learn to evaluate a body more for what it can do.

I think what circus really did for me more than anything else was make me realize that my body isn't something to be looked at and my body isn't something that has to look a certain way, but it's what it can do for me.

(Amelia, 26 years, Ireland)

Even though it is said that contemporary circus welcomes all kinds of bodies, circus artists are struggling with their physique. There are stereotypes according to circus discipline, so some of the artists are struggling with that by breaking those stereotypes or by embracing the bodies' imperfection.

I had a friend, <...> he's a really good juggler, professional juggler and uh... he did this, uh, Swedish circus school of DOCH back in the days. And, um... there, he was with his friends [name] and [name] who are... they all professional

jugglers nowadays. And they were there in the first year, and, uh, they got a lot of comments of these things that, you know, like... like this... this is what jugglers usually have when they go to circus school. And they are like, the "people who are not that flexible", "people who are not that strong", you know, "they don't go to the gym that much". And they... they were like... like, "let's... let's fucking show those people." [laughs] And they started body building like crazy. They came out of the school... they were all like much bigger than the... the bases. And, and they were really flexible. They just wanted to show the other people.

(Frederik, 35 years, Finland)

Nevertheless, it is difficult to embrace the body's imperfection, but it is once it is done, failure in the circus rarely awaits.

[I]t's kind of very funny because in few of my shows, my belly, that has been always the problem of my... problem of, of my body... because I wasn't like thin enough. So, I was always trying to lose that belly and eventually I realized that, "well, actually it's better that I just... it's there". That's kind of like, like the clown way of thinking. Well, it's here, so let's use it somehow. And now my belly is, um, yeah, very famous... legendary [giggle] belly performing all around in Europe and elsewhere. And it's kind of like <...> if you feel that you have a weakness in your body, like it's to the best... like don't hide it, just use it.

(Riita, 47 years, Finland)

Likewise, contemporary circus artists embrace finding what works for your body, not for the sake of appearance, but for the way you enjoy moving your body. There is no meaning to disciplining your body in a specific shape if it's just because of some kind of trend.

I think there was a moment <...> when yoga became very trendy, we got a bit, uh, swiped up into this trend with [friend's name] feeling like, "oh... this is so good... we're gonna make like... the body's gonna be symmetric and

everything". And, and at some moment I was just realizing that actually it's not so good. I'm becoming very weak maybe <...> it's okay to be asymmetric [laughs] and just try to like, manage the things.

(Fiona, 35 years, Finland)

It is common for women in the circus by working physically to acquire a body that does not meet the standards of femininity. Therefore, when engaged in the circus, the concern is expressed that some of the artists feel being too muscular and not meeting the standards of feminine beauty. Although this difficulty exists, the beauty of the relationship with the body removes the pain of wanting a different body, but not being able to achieve it:

I wish that my legs were five inches longer or, you know. And there is that kind of pain behind not having what you want. But then finding other ways to like, get rid of that pain by showing that you have all these other skill sets. And you have things that are really beautiful about the way you move or the tricks you do, or how you train or how you look at your body or these things.

(Amelia, 26 years, Ireland)

Based on artists' experiences it can be seen that in the circus it is not only necessary for the body to be able to do something, even if it is mastery, but much more important to be able to use it in creativity. Therefore, it can be said that in contemporary circus professionalism it is important to focus not only on skilfulness but also on creative and playful presentation. Consequently, a positive perspective is that the artists are trying to perceive the body as it is, but the tension appears from the field that it is not enough to accept, there is a demand to use your body as perfect imperfection and it is valued how you're working with that and how do you present that creatively.

STAYING IN BODY POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS BY ACCEPTING CONSTANT CHANGE

Circus artists admit that they are facing constant body changes, and after an injury or a simple break they need from time to time to admit *[t]hat everything is not always fixed. Your skills are not fixed. Your abilities are not fixed. Your physical appearance is not fixed.* (Aliisa, 36 years, Finland) Just as the constant change of the body is accepted, the understanding that the body needs to be worked on continuously also emerges. With the same understanding that the body and its capabilities are not always fixed, comes the recognition that although the body is very strong, it needs to be taken care of constantly, it changes, it ages, so constant attention to one's body is necessary in order to be able to work with it longer and achieve more. The artists shared that they feel the body is constantly evolving, even you are doing something unconsciously, because *body's just so capable of adapting to whatever. So, then you have to be like, very mindful about what you wanted to adapt into and, and then it's gonna be great.*

(Fiona, 35 years, Finland)

The pattern of seeing the body as negotiable and open to changes is very common among contemporary circus artists. It is worth mentioning that the artists are accepting it as the way of working with the body, but not as a thing to be worked against.

[W]hat I[m] learning a lot is that you have, um, clay, you know, clay, um... that you will put on the circle and form, um. And this clay, you will first see it and just add water and have the texture. And then you will make it, uh, form that, maybe to take the time of the rotation and to not rush, uh, and in it to realize how it is like. If it is thin or thick or which form you will get, and maybe you don't know the form. So it's really adding the details and taking the time of the creation that you will need. Uh, and that maybe... it's not the right... um, um, it's not the right one. So, you will wait and maybe, uh, get it in two minutes...

(Gabriella, 21 years, France)



Fig. 3. Contemporary circus performance "Bal Trap" by La Contrebande (France) in contemporary performing arts festival ConTempo, Kaunas, 2022. Photo by M. Plepys

The injury experience as being part of contemporary circus art also plays a very important role. In circus the acceptance is not only related to accepting that injury is almost inevitable with constant physical work but it can also happen not during doing circus. Moreover, accepting the injury is related to understanding that the body will be different later. Some of the artists are even evaluating the rehabilitation, waiting through the healing process as some kind of beneficial time. This pause because of the injury turned out to be beneficial for their career, and understanding of their body, as well as for their relationship with a discipline or an apparatus. Of course, all the participants of this research with serious injuries were able to come back to the circus, even though the medical specialists were not considering this possibility.

I had like uh, the shoulder injury just sort of happened in a very stupid thing. Like really, really silly, easy thing <...> that was really so annoying because like, it was completely my own fault. It was just stupid. So that was just super annoying. Um, to have... to have a surgery, have the break. And

afterwards I realized it's actually very good because I'm right-handed and it was the right shoulder and had to do so much more work with the left. And it was like really, really good because I'm really one sided, like one side is strong and the other side is like flexible. So it was really good in the end.

(Inga, 42 years, Finland)

The hardest thing to accept is when your body used to be able to do something, and now it can't or can't easily do it anymore. However, the artists share their belief that the body still changes, with the injury or without. Nonetheless, working with the body is constantly working with the changes and its needs. And this also brings back to understanding that experiencing one body by accepting yours is important in not comparing yourself with others.

You're a different person. You have different experiences. You have a different body; you have a different way of training. You have different coaches, like every single thing in your life has been completely different. So, you're not gonna be like that [other] person.

(Amelia, 26 years, Ireland)

Although circus artists shared struggling with accepting their bodily imperfections, they also opened up about the confidence felt in their bodies. To some extent, the artists admit there exists false thinking about the body as taking it simply for granted. They say that to get in a good relationship with your body a person needs to work hard to understand it, and in that constant work, a person must also constantly take care of it.

In the contemporary circus, it can also be seen that it is very difficult to do something completely perfect or perfect some skill once and for all. That's why it is hard to compare who achieved more. [T]his ACHIEVEMENT [imitating video game character's voice] kind of WHO MASTER IS like, you know, it's like... it's not like a video game when you're like BOOM, I HAVE DEVELOPED A NEW ACHIEVEMENT, JUGGLING SEVEN BALLS, UURRL CHUCHU".

(Harold, ~30 years, Estonia).

By working in the contemporary circus, the artists immediately notice that the body is very adaptable and the boundaries of what your body can do is always expanding. Working in a circus is constantly working without an obvious endpoint.

[A]s you kind of learn something, or as you start to get better at something, things just start to like progress really fast and you start to think like, "oh, if I can do that, I can do this thing. And then I can do this thing". And I think no matter how good any of us ever get on a technical level, um, we can always improve. So we can always be stronger. We can always be faster. We can always be more flexible. We can always be kind of striving for higher standards at any point. And I really love that. I really love. They're not being an end point, you know, where like it's just never gonna stop.

(Amelia, 26 years, Ireland)

Regardless, continuing to work in a contemporary circus means accommodating resilience to most of the challenges in this field, as well as discovering what you enjoy doing and understanding what your

body can do and how you can use it to express your ideas by creating art. The research showed that contemporary circus artists try accept themselves just as they are by constantly thinking about how to do it.

Suzuki⁶² ends the book with the quote, that very much represents not only Westernized Wabi Sabi ideas but also the way contemporary circus artists experience their bodies: *Accepting our imperfections is not an excuse for sliding into conformism and standing still. We must take a step forward each day to be the best imperfect person we can be.*

CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary circus artists are adopting a more phenomenological approach towards their bodies. Accepting the body as "it is what it is", for contemporary circus artists is accepting one's body's experience and uniqueness of capabilities. Nevertheless, the artists are dealing with stereotypes in the circus industry, as well as the "normal" body expectations from society.

Perfecting imperfection in the contemporary circus does not mean converting something imperfect into perfect, it is more about using your imperfection creatively, by sustaining positive relationships with the body. Contemporary circus artists' bodies are most of the time presented in front of the audience, which means the body is always watched and judged. Hence, the artists admit to struggling with accepting their bodily imperfections, but at the same time, they learned or are constantly trying to learn to evaluate a body more for what it can do instead of evaluating its appearance. It's very close to the post-essentialist approach that there is no ideal never changing truth about the body.

Contemporary circus artists are perfecting their physical skills while at the same time being aware of this perfection ephemerality as well as the constant possibility of change. All of this is closely related to the ideas of the *Wabi Sabi* concept. Moreover, with this recognition of the body's negotiability comes the understanding that although the body

is very strong, it cannot be taken for granted, and needs to be taken care of constantly. The injuries, or overcoming fear, for those who were able to come back to the circus, turned out to be beneficial for their career and for developing closer relationships with their bodies, as well as arguing with the limits imposed on their bodies through socialization.

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NETOBULUMO TOBULINIMAS: PARALELĖS TARP ŠIUOLAIKINIO CIRKO ARTISTO ĮSIKŪNIJIMO IR VAKARIETIŠKOS WABI SABI KONCEPCIJOS

Santrauka

Wabi Sabi yra japoniškas konceptas, neturintis universalios apibrėžimo ir besivadovaujantis trimis principais: niekas nėra tobula, niekas nėra baigta ir niekas nesitęsia amžinai⁶³. 2018 m. adaptuota Wabi Sabi versija pradėjo populiarėti Vakarų pasaulyje⁶⁴ ir ši vakarietiška interpretacija atsitiktinai siejasi su tuo, kaip šiuolaikinio cirko artistės (-ai) išgyvena savo kūniškumą. Tyrimas parodė, kad šiuolaikinio cirko artistės (-ai) nuolat stengiasi koncentruotis ne į kūno išvaizdą, o į tai, ką ir kaip gali padaryti jų kūnas. Jos (-ie) pripažįsta, kad kūnai nėra tobuli, ir dalijasi apie pasinaudojimo tuo netobulumu svarbą. Be to, šiuolaikinio cirko artistų kasdienybėje taip pat labai daug dėmesio skiriama nuolatos besikeičiančiam kūnui ir atitinkamai to permąstymui plėtojant teigiamus santykius su kūnu. Šis straipsnis yra sociologinis žvilgsnis į sąsajas tarp jau egzistuojančių įsitikinimų šiuolaikinio cirko srityje ir vakarietiško Wabi Sabi idėjų.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: šiuolaikinis cirkas, cirko kūnas, kūniškumas, Wabi Sabi.

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