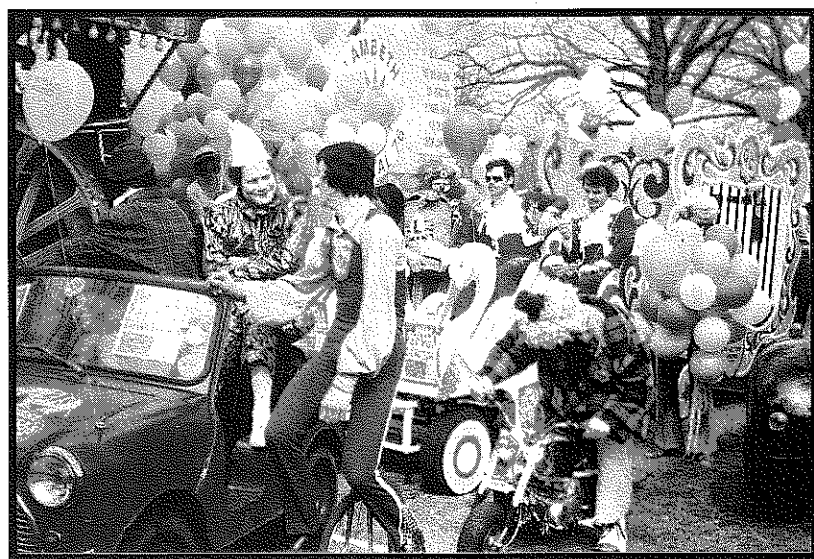
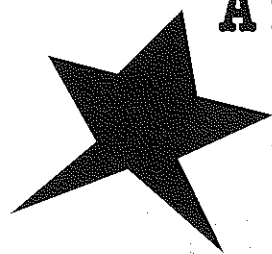


Anthropologist As Clown



In June 1992 Ioan Davies interviewed Yoram Carmeli, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Haifa in Israel, about his experiences in conducting research in a travelling circus in Britain. Carmeli was at that time a visiting Professor at Victoria College, University of Toronto.

ID: I'd like you first to tell us a little bit about your background and how you came to be interested and involved in studying the circus.

YC: I think that in much anthropological field-work there is this hidden side which is probably more directly related to the anthropologist's biography than usually is the case with other scientific work. For the more personal part, the circus initially attracted me as a musician. I wanted to study the problem of doing art, the experience of performing. The other part was shifting from sociology to anthropology. I taught sociology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and we had this positivistic kind of sociology, a theoretical discipline which very often sacrifices the

holistic - both the holism of the individual and even the holistic view of the group or the community - in favour of categories and in favour of correlating dimensions, etc. This sociology is old-fashioned now but that was the sociology I was involved with, so I missed something more direct, and more synthesizing. The few anthropological works that I'd read from the English anthropological tradition attracted me. These were monographs about West African societies: Black Byzantium, the Nuer, and Meyer Fortes' work on the Tallensi. I liked these coherent systems. Of course, later criticism and theory made a strong case against that kind of anthropology, against the closed system approach, but I liked it a lot. There was something very aesthetic about it and it appealed to my artistic imagination. That's what attracted me to anthropology. In addition to this, there was this challenge which is now really

commonplace but at that time was quite new: that was an anthropology of modern society and anthropologists learning about their own society or at least learning about their own culture. I felt that if I did anthropology it must be an anthropology of modern society. So these elements combined. At the time I was a soldier in the Yom Kippur War: I had six months on the west bank of the Suez Canal to reflect on what I was going to do intellectually. All these together brought me to England, the 'home country' of classical anthropology.

ID: What happened then?

YC: That was a fun story because I came as a mature student. I was thirty five years old, and a fairly experienced sociologist. I registered at University College, London, as a graduate student to be supervised by Mary Douglas and I was about to start taking courses. However, after two months I realized that I wanted

to get out into the field. The department was flexible enough and, after examining me, allowed me to go and start my field-work.

ID: How did you find a circus to work with?

YC: It was Christmas and there was a circus on Clapham Common in London. So I came to the circus and went behind the ring doors. I tried to talk to people but they all discouraged me and said that no one would take me on in the circus because I'm not "family."

ID: Because you are not family?

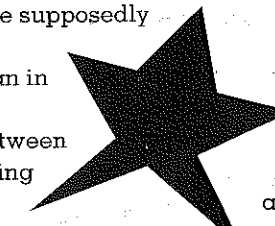
YC: Because I'm not from a circus family and because, well, you see, outsiders come to circuses, for a week or for a few days, if they are journalists, and then go away.

They're not very liked by circus people. (T.V. people are more acceptable because they provide a chance of being seen). But then they all told me about Gerry Cottle (who is Mr. Brown in my papers) and they said that Gerry Cottle might be interested because he is not from a circus family and is more open-minded than others. I met Jerry Cottle at Blackheath, where his circus was performing its Christmas show. When I offered my services as a cello player he said "Well we don't need a cello player but can

you play a trumpet or saxophone?" We agreed that I would contact him when I was ready to play the saxophone. I bought a saxophone and started to take lessons in London. For five weeks I used to practice in spite of all my neighbours. However, you can't develop vibrato in five weeks. When I came to the circus I failed the band-leader's exam but Cottle agreed to take me as a tentman and that's where my Circus career started.

ID: Can you say something about the way in which the other people in the circus viewed you.

YC: In the beginning I didn't have accommodation in the circus and as long as the circus stayed in the London area I travelled every day to my work as a tentman. That kept me a little bit of an outsider and the relationship didn't crystallize, but once I had been allocated some space in the organist's caravan, then circus people immediately had to categorize me. I said I was a student of the circus and that I wanted to write an Anthropology of the circus but that sounded strange. Besides, I was working as a tentman. But then again, although I was working and generally considered a tentman, some of the people knew about me supposedly being a musician or expecting to be a musician in the circus. (There is a big cleavage in the circus between being a musician and being



a tentman). They asked me but couldn't make sense of it: I was a musician, but worked as a tentman! Also, because I wanted to be honest with them, I told them that I was going to write about the circus. So first they thought

that I was simply one more journalist. They were suspicious, but gradually my tent-manship took over. I was a very good worker. I also had this mystique of being an ex-Israeli soldier who could handle difficult tasks. The performers, however, were not very cooperative. The issue of hierarchy was very, very strong in circuses. Either you were a tentman, coming as a drifter from somewhere, going away to somewhere else or you were born to the circus. I was a tentman and I stayed.





DORSET EVENING ECHO

Saturday, August 13, 1977

5p

Circus wedding

IT was the day the circus came to the Town Hall at Weymouth, the day that unicyclist Roland Santus married 19 year old Anne Strawford.....



ID: On the other hand, being a tentman must have given you the opportunity to view entire performances a number of times and get a sense of what the whole organization was.

YC: That's right. That could be done, also, from an artist's point of view, as happened to me later, but as a tentman I could learn a lot of



Two of the bridegroom's five unicycling brothers provide a guard of honour for the circus couple.

things. For instance we used to crawl every morning underneath the seats to see what people dropped. That was an interesting experience. It was also interesting to see what the tentmen tried to pick up and collect. (I always give this story to students in my anthropology courses as an exotic example demonstrating how responsible anthropologists are as far as data collecting is concerned).

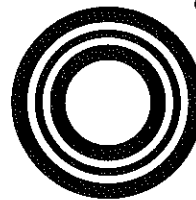
One morning, when we were crawling, my partner Big Brian found a lapel button and asked me, in his Yorkshire accent, "Read it to me, read it to me." I couldn't understand him at all at that time and he couldn't understand me. Eventually I said "Read it yourself!" and he became very angry. Later I asked someone, "Why was Brian angry?" and they said "Don't you know he cannot read?" I found out about Brian's illiteracy by actually confronting it.

Later on, there was another case. We arrived in Portsmouth and he fell in love with a prostitute and really wanted to marry her. He kept dreaming about

it, especially that the woman would cook for him. When we left Portsmouth the girl was left behind, and then he started corresponding with her, but as he couldn't write his letters, the owner's secretary wrote letters for him. That was another proof that Brian could not read and write. Then there was another occasion when we came back to the Portsmouth area. I was driving a truck and he was sitting alongside me. Suddenly he identified something on the roads, on the traffic signs, and he said, "Oh are we around Portsmouth?" I said, "Yes." "O Fuck! I could find this girl." That was another opportunity where I could see that Brian could not read and write. If I had gone about this question of reading and writing by using a sociological questionnaire, Brian would have kicked me out of his caravan. That's a good example showing how anthropologists can collect data so that it means something. I could learn only these details as a tentman. I could, of course, also feel how heavy and rough is circus tenting paraphernalia and how things are composed from bits and pieces, which was very important to my own experience of the circus. As a tentman I had an opportunity for personal experience which I did not have as a performer where I had to cope with the pressures of other performers. I could experience the circus hierarchy from the bottom up. I also gained a sense of England from below, for instance being called "Boys," "Gerry's Boys," by T.V. people who came for some shots. I was one of the boys.

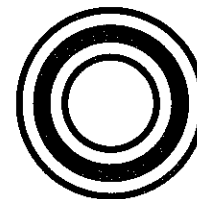
ID: Can you say something about the family connections in the circus and how that works at getting people jobs in the hierarchy. For example, to be a performer do you really have to be a relative of the people who run that particular circus?

YC: It's hard to be precise but that's fairly correct. There is some



discrepancy, because some people do penetrate especially by marriage, but then they have to invent family identities. They might call themselves by their wife's name if the wife came from a circus family. Gradually they become part of the "family." The issue of inventing

genealogies and relating oneself to a circus figure is very important. Once you're "family" you're entitled to the ring even if you're very bad. And of course if it's a small family circus everyone goes to the ring, as well as doing technical and mechanical and administrative jobs. It is however noteworthy that no one in the family really becomes a star because a concept of stardom is something which doesn't go very well with the traditional circus family and family relationships. Stardom is something which is developed in the most modern, spectacular circuses and among international performers. Family performance is not based on stars. As a family member you're a performer and even if, as sometimes happens, you're expelled from the family show, expelled from the circus world you are not. Suppose you have a struggle with your parents: you want to marry that girl, they don't allow you. You marry her nevertheless, you even go to another circus because you want to live with your girlfriend and in that other circus you don't have a performing job. Still, you're recognized as circus family, from a circus family, entitled to the ring.



ID: Historically, are the circus families descendents of people who have been in circuses since the year dot?

YC: When I looked at a list of circus people 100 years ago and at an equivalent contemporary list (for instance a guest list of circus reunions) I find very few common names. This means that there really is a circulation of people in the circus business. Still, once you're in, you consider yourself family, the public expects you to present yourself as family. It's part



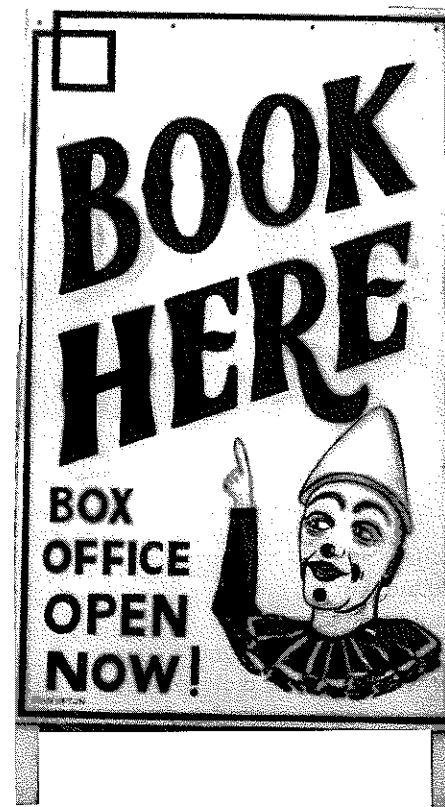
of the show to be family and also to think about yourself as family because that's part of the existential condition that you are put in. Statistically and demographically, however, there is a rotation of names in the circus and the reason is very simple: people come from the outside by marriage or even as tentmen or general workers, who may also seldom marry in. Then people leave the circus because

they marry out. Also, because circuses collapse very easily, people have to find somewhere else to go and, if they stay outside the circus business for two years or so, they already have removed themselves. Thus although it is run by families and presents the image of family, the real families are much more flexible and fragile.

ID: Did you get any sense of the length of time a circus survives? Do they collapse easily? Do they re-form after a collapse, or do they just disappear?

YC: Well, every season there were ten to fifteen new circuses, new small circuses on the road. It's very easy to launch a small circus. All it takes is one lorry in which you put the tent and one caravan which a

lorry pulls and in which you live with your wife. You can make a living. However, if you make two, three or four unsuccessful moves which cost money - gasoline, renting the ground, feeding animals, if you have any, and paying the license for them - then the circus collapses. In every season many small circuses collapse, the more established names of companies survive longer. In England they can survive as long as three generations. Beyond that, there is the problem of the expanding family and even the largest or the optimal sizes of circus can feed only so many people. Thus there are processes of fission in circuses, and then fusion because these little nuclei, the little fragments of families can combine to form smaller circuses or unite with other circuses so



that new ones start again. But, then, they collapse easily, economically and structurally, because of the family cycle and the size.

ID: Let's move on. In one of your papers you deal with being on-stage even if one's off-stage. Can you say something about that, that is, the circus performer's awareness of public perception?

YC: I think that this is really the most important issue about the circus. It even defines, in my understanding, what circus is, something which I call "total self display." A whole life, every bit of interaction, of privacy, the personal setting, the life setting: your apartment, your caravan, inside and outside, everything is presented to the public and that's exactly what the circus is about, turning the whole person into an object, something to be displayed.

In this respect, the spectacle of a modern circus is comparable to the traditional freaks in the fairground. But the circus people are human beings, they are not traditional freaks. Even if a freak is presented in the circus, the freak is human - the midget is not in a cage or behind a curtain, he is a clown. He speaks, he tells jokes. So circus people are displayed and constitute a strange sense of human beings who are also at the same time objectified, relating by dis-relating, communicating by dis-communicating. To my understanding this is the main attraction of circuses, the attraction of creating a sense of unique ontology, unique time, time out of

Now— do you get the point, son?

● LIFE isn't exactly a bed of roses for eight-year-old Tony Walls.

In fact following in father's footsteps is leaving young Tony at the sharp end of things.

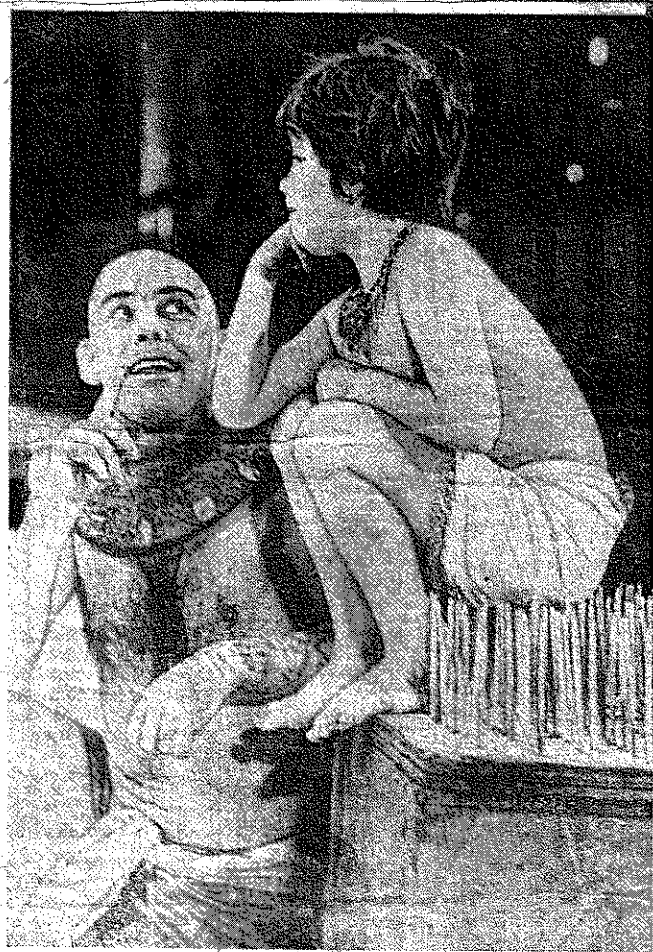
It's the sort of thing that happens when your Dad earns his living by lying on a bed of nails and walking barefoot along razor sharp sword blades.

Dad in this case is Barrie Walls—professional name El Hakim—one of the members of Garry Cottie's Circus, which is in Cardiff this week at Ninian Park car park.

Last time he appeared in the city Barrie got his name into the Guinness Book of Records by spending a couple of days lying on his bed of nails.

Now it looks as if young Tony is heading the same way. He spends hours under the watchful eye of Dad learning the point of it

that sort of expert job. It's virtually a short life.



time and thus reifying for the public an illusion of historical time, of relations, of community. That's what circus, or the tradition of the circus, tried to convey for a long time, till we come to the post-modern age. The modern circus started creating a unique genre which grew out of the traditional fair to establish something new which fitted into nineteenth-century experience.

ID: How did you find yourself fitting into that as a participant observer?

YC: First of all, it was hard to be accepted because obviously if we talk about people who live by dis-communicating themselves by displaying their "real" "off-stage" life, then absorbing somebody from the outside becomes very problematic. These people's life experience involves having a family as a very important dimension of their lives because in the family they live and relate as subjects.

have their own historical time, their own biographies, and themselves as a circus people. If someone tries to penetrate from the outside, to break in without being part of the family, in other words to erode the principle of family, then this person erodes something very crucial to their life experience and to their survival. Thus it was hard to be accepted. It was also difficult for me to understand the very experience that I'm now talking about. These people speak English

THE INTERNATIONAL CIRCUS CLOWN CLUB

Membership Book

No.654

YORAM CARMELI

better than I do, they watch the news on T.V., sometimes they bet on horses but, still, they were so different. It was hard to understand that they considered me as "the public" and that that was the only way they could consider me. Later on, I myself became, to a limited extent, a part of the circus. However, to live the circus experience as an anthropologist, to look at my own performance while I was trying to present myself and write about my own presentation was again something extremely different and difficult.

ID: Can you make that specific in terms of being a clown?

YC: There were many layers which made my being a clown problematic. First of all, they hated my upgrading from tentmanship to being an artist. That's something which shouldn't be done. You can become a clown only if you are family. They hated my skills: I was a musician and I could very easily fit into some kind of performing role so they tried to sabotage my work in the ring itself, during the performance. It was much more difficult to be a clown than to be a tentman, although, of course, it was an important experience. As far as I see it, clowning inculcates a general scheme of self display, of a human being objectifying himself. The clown is

life condition was like living in a goldfish bowl. I tried, and to a certain extent succeeded, to experience the circus from the inside, and then, at the same time, it was something which I couldn't take any more. I used to run away

from it. I hid in museums and libraries and tried to spend hours outside, to write letters, to phone, to go to a public bath and wash in those deserted public places. (Most of them were old and decrepit.) There I tried to regain my real person, not the circus self, and tried to mobilize that self in order to carry on with my circus work. I was in the circus but I didn't have a family in the circus, and therefore didn't have all those resources which were necessary in order to

really live in the circus.

ID: There were times when you left the circus and either went to the United States or back to Israel. What did they think of you over a period of time?

YC: I had become a clown and then, suddenly I'd leave. From their point of view there was something strange about it. I was so lucky, so successful, and yet I left. The second time that I left some of the people started to believe my stories about being an anthropologist. At the same time the whole issue of my identity became less important because by coming and going I was less threatening. They realised I didn't really mean to be in the circus at all and therefore was not dangerous enough. Later on they thought that being a researcher was a way of life, a way of my being weird, of being strange. That was a kind of solution because these people themselves lived the

AIMS and OBJECTS

1. To raise the standard of Clowning
2. To promote and develop friendly relations among the Clowns of the World.
3. To issue Bulletins at intervals containing Clown and Circus news.
4. To hold an Annual Clowns' Service and a General Meeting.

a character who trips on his own tools or hits himself by his own hand, by making self-referential movements which display him as not being aware of himself. English clowning is very much into slapstick. It's not reflexive or artistic like European clowning: it's into stupidity and the physically grotesque. Although I was a white-faced clown, which is supposedly the clever clown, the role was basically dominated by this concept of clowning. I tried to immerse myself in this experience of someone who faces the public with a display of being unaware of his own identity, objectified by his own doing. The clowning experience augmented the rest of my circus experience - this business of travelling from town to town as an alien: the sense of constantly presenting my being estranged or of my being an outsider. Time and again I could see the closure of the circus caravans, of their being painted outside, their always being on exhibition, always suggesting something to the voyeuristic eye of people, always an object. The whole framework of life, the whole



experience of being weird and I think at that point they could already relate to me, in some ways. Unfortunately the day came when I had to stop my field-work. I wouldn't say "finish" because there is no end to field-work but I had to stop. When I felt that I was partially accepted and beginning to understand the "circus" rejection of me and my own rejection of the circus - it was also the time when I had to leave.

ID: Can you say anything about the background of the people who work in the circus? Gypsies? Working class? Unskilled or semi-skilled? The bourgeoisie down on their luck?

YC: In many cases they or their circus parents came from working class families. However, looked at from a public standpoint, circus people comprise a category of their own. They have the stigma of being vagabonds, which is an old tradition in England. It's not even that they are working-class entertainers. The idea that they are associated with gypsies is bizarre. Circus people hate the idea and try to differentiate themselves from gypsies. That is seen by them as an externally-imposed stereotype. They see gypsies as giving nomadism a bad reputation.

Basically, the circus presents a totally different life situation from the gypsies. In the popular imagination, gypsies are outsiders who ignore any social contract. They are people who come to stay, while the circus goes away once it has performed its acts. The circus doesn't threaten society, nor present an alternative way of life. The circus is perceived as being constantly on the move while enhancing dominant values.

ID: Would you say something about the audiences? Was it similar in every town or did it vary?



YC: Of course it varied. When we performed in Portsmouth, Leicester, or Finsbury Park in East London we'd have this rougher kind of public. The reactions were different. When we performed in Kingsbury Park or in Barnet in North London we had this middle-class educated public. When "civilized families" came, their reactions were different. There was lots of giggling as if they didn't take it seriously, looking at the whole thing as an anecdotal thing, a piece of ongoing nostalgia. In the working-class areas, or in mixed neighbourhoods where there is unemployment, and in Harbour towns, the whole experience of being objectified was reacted to in a different manner. In a way it was a more lively performance than it was in the middle-class areas. The circus is challenged even from outside. It is sabotaged. There was much more tension there. You could even see it when the performers did their regular routines. For instance, when performing on the high wire or when putting their legs on swords, they acted more forcefully, more provocatively. For instance, during the Strong Man's performance the ringmaster challenged the public, "Is there anybody who wants to try and lift it?" Well, there was this very tall, very strong guy, who came and picked up the Strong Man's weight. That was a very critical intervention which wouldn't have happened in a middle-class area. But the Strong Man was clever; he tapped this guy on the shoulders and he took him, in full view of the public, behind the ring, and made him a Strong Man as well, rather than turning himself into an ordinary human being.

ID: So what is the essential uniqueness of circus?

YC: Circus differs from other genres in its claim to present the "real," in creating a sense of its own realness. In this respect it rejects the clear illusion and pretence which are immanent in fairground games, and yet it is not

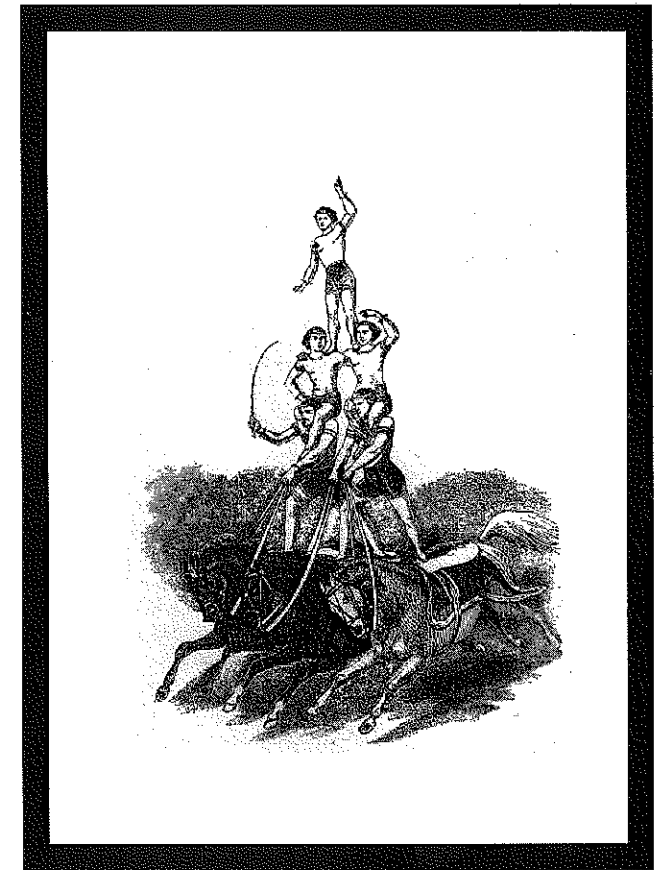
a performance like a rock concert or a theatre show. The circus performance of the real has its particular characteristic. It is not simply that the circus performs real acts, rather that the real itself is its subject-matter. When I was talking about circus performance of dis-communication and self-objectification, that's what I was trying to describe and it can be done very simply. You don't have to be a great performer, perhaps even the opposite. If you're a great performer you may spoil the whole show, because if you try to attract a public to the way you perform, then it's already clearly a play, just a performance of and not the real thing. One of the secrets of the circus is that there is no secret. The public has no high expectations of the English circus. That's an important part of the significance of the circus, thought of in terms of families and a long tradition, beyond history and time. That's what objectification is about. But to do that, to create this impression, doesn't uphold - and as a matter of fact somewhat contradicts - the notion of performance, text, or role and even the criteria for good and bad performance. The public is not called to judge the performance. The public doesn't want to judge the performance. It is not interested in how elaborate the act is; it just wants to see this subject/object play and display, and to have an experience which can be evoked by very simple means. In this respect the circus is different from theatre and any other performing art.

ID: The circus has of course been used metaphorically in different ways. It's also been painted, photographed, encapsulated into works of literature. Yet in some important respects it sits outside the concern of most artists, or of most novelists. I wonder if you can say something about that.

YC: I want to relate both to academic and artistic interest - or lack of interest - in the English circus. When I first tried to write about it I was looking for other writings about circuses and I couldn't find any serious academic material. You can say that the circus is so successful in being outside, in presenting itself as the epitome of being outside, that it really rejected researchers who wrote about serious subjects. In this way - according to my understanding - they were actually playing in the play of circus and participating in the performance, in keeping the circus outside. At the same time, on the continent of Europe things seem to be different. This is true not only for academic but also for artistic interests. It's interesting that the high culture relationship with the circus is much more developed on the continent than in Britain. There the circus is more of a play, performed by ordinary human beings. The European circus is more prevalent or attractive as a metaphor. Think of Cocteau! It is still a marginal phenomenon and it encapsulates modernity, in the sense that it evokes the search or longing for totality; it's alienated, and a metaphor for the experience of alienation. But in order to be observed and used as a metaphor circus needs to be more apparent, more conspicuous. In England, according to my experience, circus people are considered as outside the social order in such a fundamental way that excludes them even from counting as subjects for research or as "metaphor". This in itself is a very interesting research question.

ID: Was that true of the big organizations like Bertram Mills?

YC: Well Bertram Mills presented a circus which was very similar to the present day big continental circuses. It was much more established and was patronized by royalty. Everyone came to its circus which mainly performed indoors,



for example in Olympia in London. The fact that it was in a building rather than a tent makes a major difference because travelling - which resonates with the fairground - also echoes the vagabond, and the outsider which was missing from Bertram Mills. Many people in the English circus still remember the big circus. Stories are told about Bertram Mills, but that is not a circus which you could find in England after the 1960s. There were some big names - there has always been nostalgia for big names - 'in the past it was different' - but that's also part of the English circus's mystique.

ID: Is there a post-modern English circus?

YC: There is, but the concept raises difficulties. The Circus Archaos version is typical. When I saw the production two years ago it had so much "Englishness" in it, and it sort of exploded what the circus always contained in itself

and presented by being outside society. Circus Archaos explodes society by exploding the circus's significance. But once you've seen it, that's enough. You're not likely to go and see Circus Archaos year after year and take your children to see it in order to watch how they continued your own tradition, nor how you yourself grew up compared to your children. That is something that the traditional circus provides by being the same, by not changing. But this doesn't work with Archaos. In a way it blew up and exhausted the old circus experience. There are other ways of post-modernizing the circus. So far there have been no great successes in England which should be somehow related to the particular English context.

