



LANDSCAPE
— SKETCH
CIRCUS —

circus
centrum



PREFACE

Finally, it's here: the very first Landscape Sketch on circus in Flanders.

We look back on an intensive process of data collection, research, writing, editing, and structuring—but also of continuous dialogue. From the start, it was clear that a dynamic approach was needed, one in which we continuously shared and discussed insights with the sector. This report presents the outcome of that process: not a definitive description, but a foundation upon which we can continue to build in the coming years.

The added value of this first sketch lies mainly in the consolidation of all available material. We dug into the statistics on the subsidized part of the sector and commissioned additional analyses on circus infrastructure and international activity. In dialogue with the sector, we further explored various themes through focus groups. In the final phase, we bundled all these insights into a coherent whole. Along the way, we identified the gaps in our knowledge, data, and sources—so that we can develop future knowledge about the sector and about circus in a more sustainable way.

In this first landscape sketch, we mainly focused on describing the circus ecosystem and the sector-level dynamics, supported - where possible - by data and best practices. Do not expect detailed descriptions of individual circus organizations or analyses of specific artistic practices—there simply wasn't enough time for that. The first summit has been reached, but there is a whole mountain range ahead of us that will keep us busy for years to come. This immediately affirms our legitimacy as a support center and strengthens our ambitions. We look forward to continuing this journey—with the sector as an ally and the government as an encourager, helping us to push boundaries.

Naturally, there's always room for improvement. Although more in-depth analyses and sharper conclusions are still lacking in certain areas, this first sketch provides a solid foundation. It provides a clear overview of the current state of affairs—even without extensive numerical support. We made the most of the resources available to us and uncovered valuable insights along the way. The challenges we encountered—such as the lack of a broad consensus or a clear definition of what circus means today—we see as opportunities to further explore and refine together with the sector.

Compared to other parts of the cultural sector, the circus field is less professionalised, less supported, and less developed. The annual Flemish subsidy budget for the entire circus sector is equivalent to what a single large cultural institution receives for its yearly operations.

That's precisely why this landscape sketch is so important: it highlights the strong development, unique strength, and potential of what Flanders has to offer in terms of circus. At the same time, the underlying reality remains fragile even today.

To conclude, we want to emphasize that this text is a valuable snapshot: an inspiring starting point, not a final destination. It forms a solid foundation on which we will enthusiastically build in the coming years. After all, the circus sector is a dynamic sector in full development. The goal is to continue exploring and developing knowledge about the sector through data, analysis, and dialogue.

We are especially grateful for the journey we undertook together with the sector and proud of what this landscape sketch is. One of the external reviewers we involved at the end—someone with a fresh perspective and a deep understanding of (circus) matters—called it a tour de force. And that's exactly how it feels: as if we've moved a mountain.

We breathe, dream, act, and think circus. And we're eager to delve even deeper in the coming years. We hope that by highlighting circus in such a nuanced way, we can show readers what circus is—and what it can be.

Enjoy the read.

Note: The chapters "Description of the Circus Sector" and "Six Themes Shaping the Circus Sector" have been shortened for the English version. We chose to zoom in on three themes we considered most relevant for an international audience.





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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS A LANDSCAPE SKETCH (CIRCUS)?

The Department of Culture, Youth and Media (DCYM) commissioned Circuscentrum, the intermediary organization for the Flemish circus sector, to create a circus landscape sketch. Like several other support points within the cultural sector, Circuscentrum must also produce such a landscape sketch once per policy period.

A landscape sketch – in practice, a comprehensive analysis – maps trends, developments, practices and needs within a specific field. For the circus sector, this is the very first landscape sketch. In other words, it is a baseline, with both great historical and strategic value. This landscape sketch is not the end point, but rather a starting point for ongoing monitoring and development.

The circus landscape sketch describes the entire circus sector ecosystem. It examines aspects such as education, creation, presentation, development and training, and includes both subsidised and non-subsidised initiatives. It also includes a wide range of participants, from amateurs through semi-professionals to professionals. Where possible and useful, we also include an international perspective, which gives us the opportunity to outline the Flemish circus landscape against global trends and practices.

As a tool relevant to policy and practice, the landscape sketch serves a dual purpose: firstly, it is a basis for developing policy visions across the circus sector, and secondly, it supports practical and organisational development within the circus sector itself. It helps policymakers make informed decisions that match up with current needs and opportunities. At the same time, it is an important tool that the sector can use to stand back from actual practice and reflect on how the field is evolving. The reflection and dialogue created during the process are important to help underpin the sustainable development of the sector. By mapping out and analysing key evolutions and trends within the circus landscape, we can better identify future challenges and opportunities.

The landscape sketch is also a thorough strength-weakness analysis that identifies the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats within the circus field. This analysis serves as a foundation for strategic exercises and reflections on the future, essential for the further development of the circus landscape. It provides some important building blocks for strategic vision papers and policy plans, and thus plays a crucial role in shaping the future of the circus sector in Flanders.

In preparing this landscape sketch, we deliberately chose an interactive process. We therefore involved various players within the circus landscape, through focus groups or other research.

The circus landscape sketch provides a well-researched overview of the field and reflects the diverse perspectives and experiences of the actors involved. Thanks to the interactive approach, this landscape sketch is a collaborative development process – a self-reflection that creates movement – and is relevant to everyone involved in growing and supporting the circus landscape.

METHODOLOGY

To map out the sector, we used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Because the complexity and heterogeneity of the sector require a broad approach, we looked at the landscape sketch from a range of perspectives and consulted a series of sources. This landscape sketch aims to paint as complete a picture as possible of the circus sector in Flanders, taking into account both the subsidised and non-subsidised parts.

GEOGRAPHICAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL DELINEATION

This study focuses geographically on Flanders and Dutch-speaking Brussels (hereinafter 'Flanders'). Where relevant, we also discuss the context of Wallonia and French-speaking Brussels, but the data and research collected mainly relate to Flanders. We consider organisations to be Flemish when they are based in Flanders or receive Flemish subsidies, even if they also receive support from the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (hereinafter 'WBF') or other sources in addition.

The chronological delineation of this landscape sketch presented a challenge. Available data on the sector is scarce and often collected ad hoc, so continuous series are rarely available. Although it proved difficult to go far back in time for much of the data, we deliberately chose not to limit the analysis to the current 2021-2025 policy period.

Moreover, almost all the datasets are bounded to 2023 because full series for 2024 were usually not available at the time of publication. One exception is the distribution figures for the cultural centres. Programming for the upcoming season (2024-2025) had already been announced at the time of publication. This is why we added these. Although programming may still change during a season, these datasets do provide a glimpse into the presence of circus at cultural centres. In this landscape sketch, we represent certain numbers in seasons or school years because some circus organisations work with these. In that case, it is impossible or irrelevant to report on the basis of calendar years.

Where possible, the landscape sketch makes statements about the full period for the two circus decrees: 'Decree on support for the circus arts in Flanders' (2008-2020) and 'Decree containing a circus policy' (2021-2025) (hereinafter 'first Circus Decree' and 'second Circus Decree'). In some cases, however, data is only available from the second Circus Decree.

A major concern in interpreting the figures is the coronavirus crisis. The lockdowns and accompanying measures have also had a major impact on the circus sector. Organisations postponed or cancelled projects, operations and training came to a halt, and circus companies could not tour or perform. Several evolving figure series therefore show a dip in 2021 and 2022. The first corona-free year is 2023, which also makes it the last year in many of the figure series used. So we must be careful in interpreting the figures used, especially when they reflect an evolution.

This landscape sketch constitutes a baseline. Here, we are mapping out for the first time certain segments, characteristics and/or evolutions of the Flemish circus sector. Owing to the feasibility and the impact of the coronavirus crisis discussed earlier, we chose to examine only 2023 in these cases. Circuscentrum is looking at which datasets we can continue systematically so that we can discuss further evolutions in a future landscape sketch.

SOURCES

The Flemish circus sector is diverse and multifaceted, but often receives too little attention in both focused (international) academic research and in broader cultural studies, such as the participation survey.¹ In recent years, Circuscentrum has been committed to generating research that identifies the characteristics of the Flemish circus sector. This research is usually conducted by students and remains limited and variable in quality. Although there is increasing attention within (international) academic research, as evidenced by the creation of the peer-reviewed journal *Circus Arts, Life and Sciences* in 2022, there remains a shortage of figures, data and research, especially for the Flemish circus sector.

This landscape sketch aims to paint a comprehensive picture of the Flemish circus sector, which includes both subsidised and non-subsidised individuals and organisations. Subsidy data is the largest dataset here, which gives a distorted picture. Despite attempts to collect alternative data on a larger portion of the sector, it remains difficult to get a complete picture of the non-subsidised portion of the circus sector.

The figure series available are not always complete; sometimes, they had been interrupted for several years or the collection method was unclear, making it difficult to continue them. For example, it proved very difficult to collect numerical data on specific topics (such as inclusion) or on certain subgroups (non-subsidised organisations). To add some depth and breadth to the material collected, we conducted some additional qualitative research where possible.

¹ Móring and Péter Kiszl, 'Circus Arts in Content Service Systems', *Art Libraries Journal*, 48.4 (2023), pp. 111–125.

The interviews and focus groups, as organised by Circuscentrum, provided some valuable insights, but some voices are missing because Circuscentrum's network – although broad – does not cover the entire Flemish field. In this landscape sketch, we use four main groups of sources:

1 • Data collection by Circuscentrum:

This includes a combination of desk research, surveys and internal data. Some important sources here include:

- 'Circus in Cultural Centres': a list of programmed circus performances at cultural centres in Flanders. This data was collected through desk research at the beginning of the season, meaning any subsequent cancellations or additions were not included. For the 2023-'24 season, 72 cultural centres were surveyed, and three cultural centres were added to the list in 2024-'25, bringing the total to 75 centres surveyed.
- 'Circus Festivals 2023': a list (2023) of programmed circus performances at circus festivals or multidisciplinary festivals in Belgium, including circus in the programming. We collected this data through desk research during the season. Adjustments to the programmes that were not communicated online were therefore not included.
- 'Overview of companies': a non-exhaustive list of circus companies and artists active in Flanders. The dataset is based on companies listed on [Circusinflanders.be](https://circusinflanders.be), companies that applied for subsidies through the Circus Decree, and some internal contacts from Circuscentrum. This dataset was then supplemented by desk research.
- 'Data from projects organised by Circuscentrum': participation in training and pathways organised by Circuscentrum.
- 'Circus-Friendly Local Policy Process': a process conducted in collaboration with Doenker. As part of this process, we organised a stakeholder survey for policy and sector.
- 'Safety Process Impact Measurement': an online survey about the impact of the safety process among participants in the educational component of the process.
- 'Circus Landscape Sketch Stakeholder Survey': between January and June 2024, we organised a total of seven focus groups with guidance from Doenker as part of the Circus Landscape Sketch. (Overview of participants: see annex)
- Circusmagazine: the quarterly published magazine features articles, opinion pieces and in-depth interviews that provide qualitative input into the topics and perspectives prevalent in the sector. Where relevant, we reference articles or use quotes to illustrate.
- Cirq'onstances I (2009) and Cirq'onstances II (2018): Circuscentrum publications that compile relevant figures and insights from the sector.

2 • Data provided by the Department of Culture, Youth and Media (hereinafter 'DCYM'):

Under the Coordinated Arrangements Research Framework, DCYM provided data to Circuscentrum, including:

- Subsidy figures: all the data is from subsidy files submitted within the First and Second Circus Decree, including the associated accountability files, kiosk fields and appendices.
- Policy-relevant data: in consultation with Circuscentrum, DCYM collected various 'policy-relevant data' from structurally subsidised organisations between 2021 and 2023. It concerned information about members (age, gender, etc.) of youth circuses, information about staff (number, type of agreement, etc.), the number and type of activities organised by youth circuses, creation spaces and artists, as well as the location of the activity.

3 • Outsourced research:

Including:

- In 2022, Matilde Ruppert, a Cultural Management student, was doing an internship at Circuscentrum; she wrote a thesis on "What is circus? A field delineation of the Flemish circus sector," in which she explored how to define the Flemish circus sector based on 13 in-depth interviews.
- "Sustainable careers of circus performers." (Further Circus Careers Study) Is a study conducted by IDEA-consult in 2023, commissioned by DCYM for a proposal by and in collaboration with Circuscentrum. The study used several research methods: an online survey of 70 Flemish circus artists, in-depth interviews with 10 circus professionals and two policy staff, four focus groups and supplemented by desk research. In the interim, a sounding board group considered the findings.
- In 2023, Circuscentrum commissioned a study around the status of circus infrastructure in Flanders from Nick Verginis², circus researcher and journalist. This resulted in the final report 'Status quo of Circus Infrastructure in Flanders: Challenges and Opportunities'
- In 2024, a group of students from the 'International Business Management' course at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences in Ghent conducted a study on the internationalisation of the Flemish circus sector. Based on desk research, they compiled a dataset with the distribution figures for 50 Flemish Circus companies in 2023. To further supplement their research, they conducted interviews with 15 respondents (circus artists and students).

4 • Supplementary research:

Where useful and possible, we supplemented these data and studies with existing research, both domestic and foreign. (see bibliography)

² Nick Verginis, Nick Verginis. *Circus Spaces, Residencies*, <https://www.nickverginis.com/>.

METHOD

The landscape sketch is the result of a collaborative development process, in which we coordinated the conclusions with the broader circus field at several points. Circuscentrum first conducted some analyses based on the above sources. This was how we identified the scale, scope, operation and dynamics of the sector. The information gathered formed the basis for the landscape sketch and was further supplemented and nuanced during organised stakeholder discussions, where we involved the expertise of colleagues at Circuscentrum.

This landscape sketch consists of a descriptive section (Chapters 2 and 3) and a more reflective section (Chapters 4 and 5):

- **Chapter 2 'Description of the circus sector':** in this section, we consider the history of circus and Flemish policy, followed by a description of the sector and its players.
- **Chapter 3 'Circus in society':** here, we place circus within the broader cultural field and society.
- **Chapter 4: 'Themes moving the circus sector':** in this section, we dig deeper into three knowledge themes: professionalisation, international work and safety.
- **Chapter 5: 'SWOART':** we bring together the descriptions and reflections from the previous sections into an overarching strengths-weaknesses analysis.

Since this is the first circus landscape sketch, we made some conscious choices in the selection of themes. We chose topics that tell enough about the uniqueness of the sector and what is going on there. The selection of these themes was based on discussions with the sector and was fine-tuned during the June 2022 Sector Day.

Originally, 'digitalisation' was on the list; later, we decided to replace this theme with 'space and infrastructure'. During conversations with the sector, the need for space for circus came up several times (such as during the Circus-Friendly Local Policy process). Although 'digitalisation' is an important societal theme, it is currently less prevalent in the circus sector; as a result, there is not enough circus-specific information available to conduct any targeted analyses.

To analyse these themes, we organised a broad stakeholder survey guided by Doenker. In January 2024, we held an initial focus group with the Circuscentrum board to review the methodology and initial conclusions. Afterwards, seven focus groups took place, one for each theme and one around a specific target group.

**Table 1 • Overview of focus groups**

THEMA	DATUM	LOCATIE
Professionalisation	5/03/2024	Leuven – 30CC/CirkLabo
Space and infrastructure	25/03/2024	Brussels - UP
Safety	25/04/2024	Antwerp - Arenberg
Ecology	08/05/2024	Leuven - CIRKL
Traditional Circus*	21/05/2024	Ghent - Wisper
Inclusion	30/05/2024	Ghent - Wisper
International Work	11/06/2024	Ghent - Wisper

* Traditional touring circuses have a specific way of working and operate in specific networks, some of which means they face different challenges than the rest of the sector. Therefore, we chose to organise a separate focus group around traditional circus.

In each focus group, we aimed to be as heterogeneous as possible, by inviting artists, traditional circuses, programmers for festivals and cultural houses, technicians, lecturers, business leaders, coordinators of youth circuses and creation spaces, distribution agencies, etc. To properly prepare the participants for the conversation, we sent a 'conversation starter' prior to each session with some initial findings and a list of recommended reading around the topic. During the focus groups, we presented some statements and asked participants to take sides by physically taking positions in the room. They then had a chance to explain their position. We then discussed some subtopics, so that we could identify the main challenges and strengths of the sector. The purpose of the focus groups was not to reach a consensus, but to expose the diverse views within the sector. Given the heterogeneity of the circus sector, with different parts of the sector facing different challenges, the focus groups added some valuable nuances to the analysis.

To carry out the strengths-weaknesses analysis for the circus field, we decided in the run-up to the project not to work with the classical SWOT structure, but a modified version – the 'SWO-ART'. In addition to the four classical components of the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats), there is regard for two additional elements: Aspirations and Results. These two elements elaborate upon the dreams and anticipated outcomes of the various stakeholders. This method provides a good basis for further future reflections within and outside the sector for the further development of the landscape.

After the focus groups, knowledge centre staff processed all the material collected. First, Circuscentrum colleagues read the synthesis texts for content, and then external readers and DCYM staff read them. In selecting external readers, we chose individuals with a wide range of knowledge and experience within the circus sector. (see appendix)





02

DESCRIPTION OF THE CIRCUS SECTOR

PERSPECTIVES ON CIRCUS

Describing and defining circus seems like a complex question; everyone who gets them will give a different answer. According to Australian circus researcher Katie Lavers, defining circus is impossible: "It seems to be an art form that actively resists containment through its elemental process of change. As soon as one attempts to set boundaries that define or categorise the circus, it mutates, it chafes at limitations and transforms itself."³

One of the ways we can look at circus is from its history. The history of circus usually starts at the end of the 18th century with the British stunt rider Philip Astley. The historical narrative starting from Astley has a strong (Western) European and Anglo-Saxon outlook. It does not always give sufficient attention to evolutions and specific characteristics of circus in other regions. "To critically talk about 'circus' now requires specific reference to geographic region and historic period, or in other words the place and time when the circus even took place. Use of the term 'circus' may also require identification of the specific act or category of skill under consideration (...) since each skill category and the various apparatus employed by each skill has its own genealogy of historical emergence, development, and use."⁴

Let us take a brief look back at this unusual story: Astley began displaying his riding skills in open air, in a circle. As his shows became more successful and competition increased, he felt the need to revamp his shows. He began adding some alternate acts: Acrobats, jugglers and tightrope walkers, who had displayed their skills at fairs and markets for centuries, found a place at theatres and variety shows at that time. The performances consisted of pantomimes and re-enactments on horseback, interspersed with other acts. Astley, his apprentices and competitors, performed their shows first outdoors, later in amphitheatres with a circular arena and ultimately in brick circus buildings. In Belgium, circuses sprang up in cities such as Brussels, Ghent, Antwerp, Verviers, Liège and Charleroi, although most of these buildings have since disappeared. Eventually, it was his former pupil and rival, Charles Hughes, who, along with Charles Dibdin, founded the 'Royal Circus and Equestrian Philharmonic Academy', thus introducing the term 'circus'.⁵

As circus spread rapidly throughout Europe during the 19th century, the performances evolved. Circuses were constantly introducing new techniques and pushing the physical limits of their acts. Well-known circuses also toured through Belgium, increasing the popularity of the circus. In the United States, they began experimenting with circus tents in the mid-19th century. Astley himself once considered performing under a tent, but soon abandoned the idea because he found it too impractical.⁶ The first shows in circus tents were small in size. Coup and Castello, in collaboration with P.T. Barnum, developed a big top with three arenas in 1882. The large scale of North American circuses would never penetrate Europe.

³ Katie Lavers and Peta Tait, eds., "Introduction. Circus Perspectives, Precedents and Presents," in *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader* (New York, 2016), 2.

⁴ 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Circus*, ed. by Jim Davis and Gillian Arrighi, pp. 1–15 (p. 6).

⁵ Duncan Wall, *The Ordinary Acrobat. A Journey into the Wondrous World of the Circus, Past and Present*. (New York, 2013), 109–16.

⁶ Ibid., 190.

Starting in the mid-19th century, circuses in Western Europe also began touring more frequently with a tent. During this period, circuses evolved into the form we know today: a show with acrobats, jugglers, clowns, etc., and animal acts, played in a tent. Many circuses revolved around families, with performers learning the tricks of the trade within the family. Circus development varied by region. In Argentina, for example, a unique form of circus emerged, linked to the local 'criollista-gaucha' genre. This form of circus has all but disappeared today.⁷

The World Wars made touring difficult, and many circuses shut down operations. The end of the Second World War brought a brief revival. In the 1950s, the circus went through a crisis: the rise of new leisure activities and new media caused a decline in audience attendance. Rising costs and increasing regulations made it increasingly difficult for circuses to survive.⁸

The social and cultural (r)evolution in the 1960s also had its effect: young performers questioned the familiar form of circus, and resisted the circus codes then in force. Performers often did not come from circus families and began to create new kinds of performances, often without animals and (sometimes) with a political agenda. Some well-known examples are Circus Oz (Australia), Archaos (France) and Cirque du Soleil (Canada). Some artists began establishing circus schools during this period.⁹ The changes and ongoing crisis in travelling circuses did not go unnoticed by the government. In the late 1970s, circus gained recognition as a culture in France, the government installed a subsidy policy and a circus college was established. In 1985, the 'Centre National des Arts du Cirque' was created. Several other European countries followed suit and the 1980s and 1990s saw the birth of several higher education courses – e.g. Académie Fratellini (FR), National Centre for Circus Arts (GB), École Nationale de Cirque (CA). In the Soviet Union, the circus took a different turn: the government decided to nationalise it. In the late 1920s, they founded the National Circus School in Moscow, with a curriculum based on the existing ballet courses. The idea of teaching circus at higher education spread through the Communist world and did not reach the West until the 1970s. Up to today, Russia has travelling tent circuses with performers trained at these specialist colleges.¹⁰

This trend also had its effect on Flanders, especially from the 1990s, when a broad artistic spectrum began to develop. Several travelling family circuses were touring around and several new circus companies were emerging and beginning to play with influences from other art forms, such as dance, theatre, visual arts, commedia dell'arte, etc. There were also several companies combining street theatre with circus techniques. Several performing arts festivals were getting attention for these new companies.¹¹ During the same period, the first youth circuses emerged in Flanders and began offering circus classes to a wider audience. Since then, the sector and the variety of companies have grown even more.

⁷ Julieta Infantino, 'The Criollo Circus (Circus Theatre) in Argentina', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Circus*, (Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 63–77.

⁸ Mark Jacobs, *Circussen in Vlaanderen* (2002), 12.

⁹ Agathe Dumont, 'Becoming an Art Form. From "Nouveau Cirque" to Contemporary Circus in Europe', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Circus*, pp. 188–202.

¹⁰ Camille Richard, "Working Conditions of Circus Artists" (2024), 11.

¹¹ "Cirq'onstances. Circus in Vlaanderen," *Courant*, Juli 2011.

The historical evolution of circus led to a spectrum of artistic forms falling under the rubric of circus today. When circus is written about, various terms often come up to create classifications, such as traditional, nouveau/new, contemporary, modern, current, circus theatre, and so on. The term used varies depending on the perspective. For example, one can look at the performance space (circus tent, street, black box), the structure of the performance (single acts, an overarching narrative), the presence of certain roles (such as a ringmaster, clowns), the use of animals, the background of the performers (family circus, training), or the business model. Depending on the angle chosen, the term used changes. For example, researcher Franziska Trapp uses the concept of risk to differentiate between traditional, nouveau and contemporary circus, abandoning the classical historical classification: “There is one major objection regarding [historic] modelling: The performance ‘La Perle du Bengale’ (1935 Cirque d’hiver) of Cirque Bouglione [...] presents the same structure as what is considered as New Circus in this [historic] modelling. However, New Circus did not even exist. And yes: it is the aim of [my] modelling to differentiate between Traditional, New and Contemporary Circus based on their technique, not based on a historical timeline.”¹²

Within Flanders, the relationship between policy and practice today helps shape the way we look at circus and the circus sector. The Circus Decree defines circus arts as “the artistic expression involving primarily (aerial) acrobatics, balance arts, object manipulation, clowning, magic, dressage or circus theatre.” This definition starts from common circus techniques and does not distinguish between different forms of circus. It is up to the applicant to indicate in the subsidy file itself how it sees and positions itself in the broader circus field. The concept of self-identification thus becomes the basis of the Flemish (subsidised) circus sector. The decree does not mention street theatre, although there are also some strong relationships between circus and street theatre in Flanders. Several companies bring circus as a form of street theatre, and many festivals also profile themselves as ‘circus and street theatre festivals’. The policy’s explicit decision to focus on ‘circus’ has meant that the ‘street arts’ have not developed as much for us.

In this landscape sketch, we approach circus from a range of perspectives. Although we start from the Circus Decree, we are not limited to subsidised organisations. The Flemish circus sector is diverse, with a range of players, each with their own background, goals and working method. In this chapter, we describe that diversity as best we can. To make some clear statements about the various segments of the sector, we will create a framework that looks at the characteristics of circus organisations and individuals.

¹² Franziska Trapp, “‘I Believe I Can Fly’ ‘I Believe She Could Fall’ Contemporary Circus Dramaturgy and the Perception of Risk’ (presented at the A Safe(r) Space for Danger, 2024)

THE FLEMISH CIRCUS POLICY OVER TIME

In the second half of the last century, circus hit a crisis, as we cited in the previous chapter. At the same time, some new forms of circus developed. From the 1970s, circus began a revival in Flanders. Former Minister for Culture De Backer set up an ad hoc policy to support the circus. In 1978, circus was listed as a cultural event, and action groups such as 'S.O.S. circus' sprang up in support. The appointment of Circus Ronaldo as 'Cultural Ambassador of Flanders' in 1998 recognised circus and brought further attention. Finally, in 2002, the Flemish government and seven circuses concluded a memorandum of agreement with the goal of improving the image of circus.

In 2007, there was a temporary regulation that served as a stepping stone towards a fully fledged decree. In 2008, the government approved the first Circus Decree to recognise circus as a fully fledged actor within cultural policy. Because circus touches upon various competences, such as youth, heritage, amateur arts, culture and sports, a separate decree came to bring together all facets of circus. The Circus Decree gave the circus sector a chance to develop its own identity.¹³

The first Circus Decree was approved in 2008 with an annual budget of 3 million euros; the first round of subsidies followed in 2009. Within the Circus Decree, companies could apply for project subsidies for: 'Creation of a production', 'Distribution of a production through a nomadic tour', 'International distribution of a production', 'The organisation of a circus festival' and 'Promotion'. In addition, scholarships came for an 'International refresher / continuing education as a circus artist' and 'Training as a teacher in the circus arts'. A structural subsidy was provided for a Circuscentrum with the mission of supporting and promoting circus both at the amateur and professional levels and building up knowledge.

The first Circus Decree offered the sector an opportunity to develop and grow, but after a few years, the opportunities within the decree proved too limited. A reform process to amend the Circus Decree came in 2015.

The Second Circus Decree builds upon the goals of the First, but focuses on improved interpretation and implementation by placing the landscape within a decree framework. It was decided to partially adopt the function-based approach from the Arts Decree. Since then, the sector has worked with fixed organisational types, focusing on one or several functions (creation, development, production, presentation, participation, reflection and education).¹⁴

- **development:** developing or guiding circus practice, talent, career and body of work. The process, research and artistic experimentation take precedence over a concrete output;
- **production (creation):** creating, implementing and spreading circus arts;
- **presentation:** sharing the circus work created and produced with an audience;
- **participation:** developing and applying vision, concepts and processes that contribute to participation, both as active participation in circus arts and confronting with circus arts, with regard for social and cultural diversity;

¹³ "Draft Decree on the Support of Circus Arts in Flanders. Explanatory Memorandum," 2008.

¹⁴ "Draft decree containing a circus policy. Explanatory Memorandum," 2019, 4.

- reflection: the reflection and critique of circus arts and the encouragement and accessibility of that reflection. This function was to be added to the Circuscentrum's core tasks (practice development).
- education: purposeful creation of learning environments that enable and promote learning by individuals, groups or communities;

An important change within the Second Circus Decree was the integration of youth circuses, whose core task is education. These youth circuses play a crucial role as the 'humus layer' of the sector – the breeding ground for talent and development. Until 2019, some youth circuses received subsidies through the Youth Decree as cultural education associations. From that year, it was decided to transfer these organisations, along with their corresponding budgets, to the Circus Decree, which further strengthened their role within the circus sector.

A second major change was the introduction of structural subsidies for circus companies (core task: creation and distribution), circus creation spaces (core task: creation, presentation, development, participation) and youth circuses (core task: education). The introduction of structural subsidies was considered necessary for the further professionalisation of the sector.

There was also a reform of project subsidies. The subsidy lines for nomadic tours, promotion, and the scholarship for circus teacher training disappeared. However, companies were given the opportunity to apply for a subsidy for the 'Creation of a production', or the 'Creation and distribution of a production' (core task: creation). In addition, they could submit projects with a duration of up to three years. This multi-year principle is intended to encourage sustainability. "Circus performers or companies often make a new creation only every three years and do not have the culture (which is also true internationally) of being attached to one company."¹⁵ There was also a reform of the subsidy for international distribution to a subsidy for 'International travel expenses'.

The subsidy line for the 'Organisation of a circus festival' (core task: presentation) was modified. Under the First Circus Decree, festivals could apply for subsidies for up to a five-year period. Within the Second Circus Decree, this is a maximum of three years. "This gives festival organisers the choice to build on their festival concept, while providing the necessary oxygen for innovation and dynamism through the project-based approach."¹⁶

Finally, the terms of the subsidy for Circuscentrum also changed. Under the First Circus Decree, this subsidy was for an association with the purpose of supporting, advancing and promoting circus, with an intermediary role between the sector and Flemish policy. Under the Second Circus Decree, this became a subsidy for a support centre with its associated core tasks: practice support, practice development, image building and promotion, and platform. The function of reflection was assigned to the core task 'practice development'. Within the Circus Decree, Circuscentrum is the only organisation with reflection as its core task.

¹⁵ "Explanatory Memorandum, 2019."

¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

The changes in the Circus Decree and the doubling of the annual total budget for both structural and project subsidies to almost 6 million euros have ensured further growth of the sector since 2021. The transfer of five youth circuses with associated budgets from Youth caused an increase in the total budget in 2019 and 2020. Between 2021 and 2023, an increase in the annual budget allocated can be seen; now, the annual total budget within the Circus Decree is 6.5 million euros. (Chart 1) The increase between 2021 and 2023 comes primarily from an increase within project subsidies.¹⁷

EVOLUTION OF CIRCUS DECREE BUDGET (WITHOUT INDEXATION)

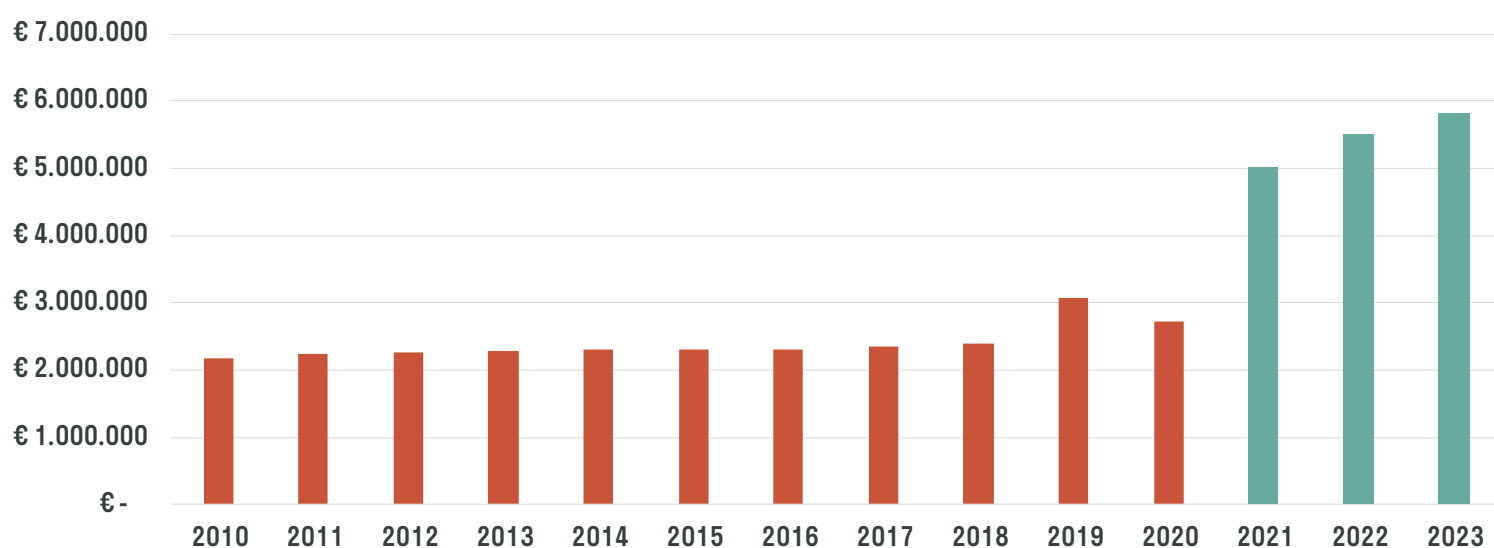


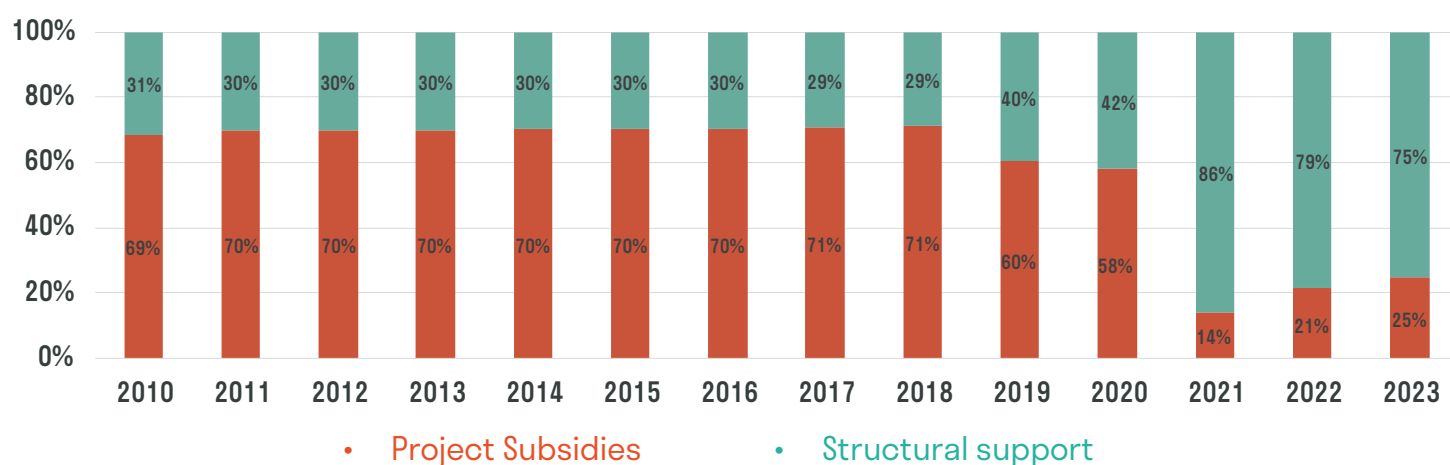
Chart 1 • DCYM data – Subsidy figures – Evolution of Circus Decree budget for 2010 – 2023, without indexation

Under the First Circus Decree, project subsidies were mainly awarded; the structural subsidy for Circuscentrum then took up about 30% of the budget. The introduction of structural subsidies for a larger number of organisations has changed the ratio, with structural subsidies taking up about 70% of the budget in the Second Circus Decree. (Chart 2) In 2019-2020, the ratio partially shifts, which is due to the transition of the youth circuses from Youth. The funds they took were considered structural subsidies within this dataset.



¹⁷ Funds for structurally subsidised organisations are indexed (partially) annually. This works with the amounts allocated, so this indexing is not included.

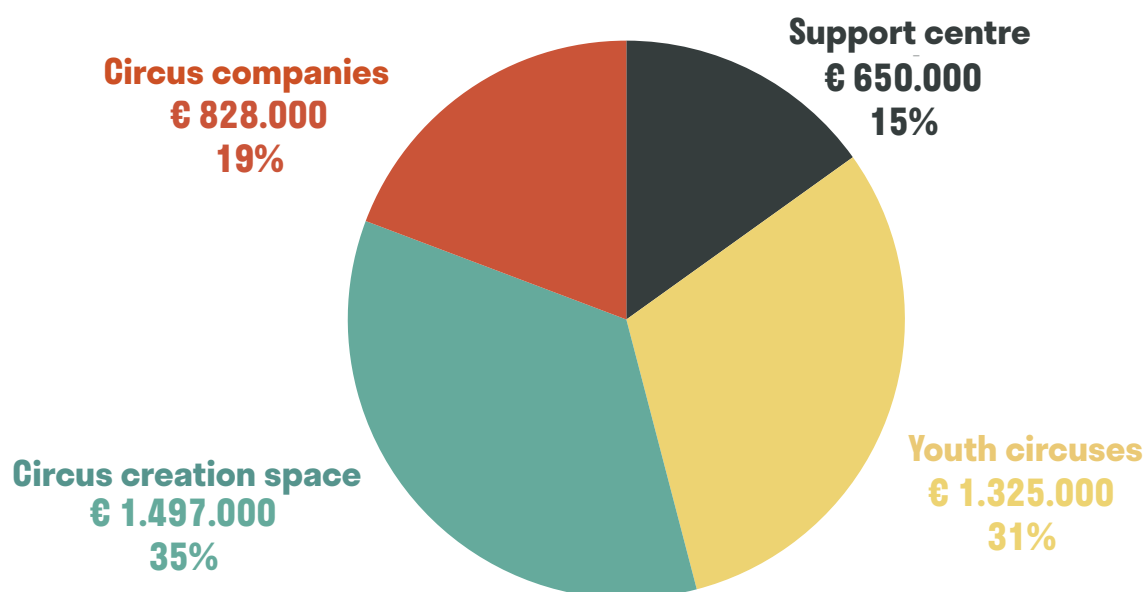
EVOLUTION OF SUBSIDIES AWARDED (WITHOUT INDEXATION)



 **Chart 2 • DCYM data – Subsidy figures – Evolution of Circus Decree ratio of structural to project subsidies for 2010 – 2023, without indexation**

Under the Second Circus Decree, 16 organisations received structural subsidies totalling 4.3 million euros. Eight youth circuses, four circus creation spaces, three circus companies and a support centre. Chart 3 shows the ratios for these four forms of work.

STRUCTURAL SUBSIDY AWARDED BY ORGANISATION TYPE IN 2021



 **Chart 3 • DCYM data – Subsidy figures – Operating Funds granted by organisation type in 2021**

PLAYERS IN THE FLEMISH CIRCUS LANDSCAPE

The circus sector in Flanders consists of a diverse group of actors, each with its own role within this unique cultural ecosystem. In this chapter, we give a brief overview of the various players in the sector, and some facts and figures. In the next chapter – System Outline – we discuss the inter-relationships of these players.

CIRCUS ACROSS FLANDERS

This map illustrates how circus has claimed its place in every corner of Flanders and Brussels. Everywhere you look, you'll find youth circuses, circus creation spaces, festivals, and distribution agencies — all contributing to a vibrant and diverse circus landscape. The names around the edge of the map represent a broad spectrum of circus companies: from those supported by the Circus Decree, to those featured on circusinvlaanderen.be, as well as traditional circuses.

- ★ Youth circus
- ★ Circus creation space
- ★ Festival
- ★ Distribution agency
- ★ Support centre





THE FLEMISH CIRCUS LANDSCAPE

Key figures and notable insights

Circus artists and companies	
€ 828.000	Annual structural subsidy amount* (excl. indexation)
€ 1.077.000	total projectsubsidiebedrag voor creatie en spreiding van een circus-productie in 2024*
MORE THAN 80	active Flemish circus companies
MORE THAN 250	active circus artists in Flanders
3	Companies receiving structural subsidies*
Between 2021 and 2024, a total of 47 out of 64 applications submitted under the subsidy for the creation and distribution of a circus production were approved.	

Circus creation spaces	
4	circus creation spaces receiving structural subsidies*
€ 1.497.000	Annual structural subsidy amount* (excl. indexation)
In 2023, the four circus creation spaces collectively reported over 200 residencies, 100 presentation moments, and 65 co-productions.	

Distribution/booking agencies	
6	in Flanders (one of which focuses exclusively on circus)
0	Subsidised distribution/booking agencies*
The six Flemish distribution and booking agencies with circus companies and artists in their client base collectively represent 22 companies.	

Circus festivals	
30	Structurally subsidised festivals in Flanders*
€ 491.641	Total project subsidy amount for the organisation of circus festivals in 2024*
Festivals in Flanders with a strong focus on circus (although not all take place annually)	
In 2023, a total of 738 performances by 196 circus companies took place at 20 Flemish (circus) festivals.	

Support centre	
1	Support centre for circus in Flanders
€ 710.000	Annual structural subsidy amount* (excl. indexation)
So far, no fewer than 81 issues of Circusmagazine have been published (the first 17 issues appeared under the name CircusVLO), with the latest issue entirely dedicated to the very first Circus Landscape Drawing.	

Youth circuses	
19	Youth circuses in Flanders
€ 1.325.000	Annual structural subsidy amount* (excl. indexation)
8	Structurally subsidised youth circuses*
In 2023, the eight structurally subsidised youth circuses taught 10,500 unique participants, 31% of whom were over 12 years old.	

Circus education	
1	Circus secondary education in Flanders (phasing out)
2	Pedagogical circus training programs in Flanders
0	Circus higher education institutions in Flanders
0	Subsidised circus training programs*
In recent years, the largest number of Flemish circus artists graduated from Fontys Circus and Performance Art (Tilburg) and Codarts Circus Arts (Rotterdam).	

Heritage stakeholders	
1	National service provider for performing arts heritage (including circus)
0	Subsidised heritage organisations*
In 2023, Circus Ronaldo received a grant under the temporary subsidy 'pilot projects for Artistic Heritage Estates' to catalogue its archive and focus on the transfer of knowledge and experiences.	

Other stakeholders	
The Flemish circus landscape includes various peripheral actors who contribute to the sector's dynamics and diversity, ranging from circus clubs to commercial players and entertainment companies. Additionally, cultural and arts centres, along with other presentation and residency venues, play an increasingly important role by providing space for and to circus.	

SYSTEM OUTLINE OF THE FLEMISH CIRCUS LANDSCAPE

The circus landscape is complex and dynamic, with numerous actors, each with their own role, purpose and operation. In the previous section, we described and defined the different actors, and zoomed in on their main characteristics, background, and their possible subsidisation within the Circus Decree.

In this system outline, we aim to describe the relationships between the various actors, zooming in on how they relate to one another, thus providing an insight into how the circus field functions and evolves. This section of the text was written based on the insights gathered from research and from the focus groups. We explore several of these relationships in greater depth in the later (thematic) chapters. For example, compensation and funding systems are discussed in more detail in the Professionalisation chapter.

The widely branched network of youth circuses in Flanders and Brussels is often named as the foundation of the sector; for many people, they are the first point of contact with circus and they are a breeding ground for artists and teachers. Through classes, children, young people and adults are introduced to circus as a leisure activity. Many youth circuses additionally engage in projects and community outreach, as well as camps and workshops, thus building up a community both within and around their own organisation. Within this community, it is often volunteers who keep the (smaller) operations running. Youth circuses derive their income from registration fees, local subsidies and, to a limited extent, from merchandise sales, workshops, etc. However, small voluntary initiatives are under pressure, in part because of rising costs. They can use less leverage, such as (structural) subsidies within the Circus Decree and elsewhere. In recent years, several small organisations disappeared or scaled down their operations because it did not prove feasible to continue them. If this trend – occurring mainly outside metropolitan contexts – continues over the long term, it will cause an impoverishment of the circus education field.

Alongside the youth circuses, there are numerous commercial providers who offer circus education through circus camps and other initiatives. There is also a circuit of clubs. The ensemble of large subsidised, small non-subsidised, commercial providers and clubs also increases accessibility and diversity within the circus landscape beyond the metropolitan context.

Through the youth circuses, interested young people move on to the rest of the sector. On the one hand, pedagogical courses train up circus teachers who go on to work at various youth circuses in Flanders. The youth circuses are actively pursuing the flow of young people into these pedagogical training programmes. As cited earlier, the youth circuses, in collaboration with Circuscentrum, are funding and organising several of these pedagogical training programmes. Young people often continue to teach or carry out other jobs at their own youth circuses. Some founded their own youth circuses; despite the pressure on small operations, new operations are still emerging. Teachers receive volunteer compensation or are salaried (possibly part-time). Smaller youth circuses are often volunteer operations and not employers, so they cannot hire teachers. (see Professionalisation chapter)

On the other hand, youth circuses provide a flow into the artistic field. Several youth circuses introduce their members to artistic creations through production groups that gain their first stage experience at festivals and events. They also provide contact with professional artists through guest teachers, coaches and performances. Youth circuses refer interested young people to preparatory internships and training, and then on to professional courses (in Brussels or abroad). After training (usually abroad), youth circuses are the place where graduating students seek to reconnect with the Flemish circus landscape, in order to rebuild a network for their professional circus practice.

This professional artistic circus practice is often combined with teaching at a youth circus. Both at the beginning of the career and when the body is less conducive to artistic circus practice. This combination provides them with a source of income, but equally ensures ongoing interaction between emerging and established talent, as well as continued knowledge transfer and continuity within the field.

Not all circus performers start at a youth circus and/or undergo training. Within circus families, young people grow up in the circus, and are often on stage from a young age. They learn the trade – both circus techniques and all the other skills needed to keep a circus running – within the family, and eventually take over the family business. There are also some lateral entrants with backgrounds in theatre, dance or visual arts, as well as gymnastics or parkour, for example. Some performers do not come into contact with circus until they are already working as professional artists within another discipline and retrain as circus performers through master classes, workshops and/or temporary training.

Circus performers establish companies within which they display their artistic activities. They often invest their own funds in the company, especially before its founding and in the early years. Circus performers work in different ways, sometimes within their own company, sometimes as performing artists or in a combination of both. This can change depending on where a performer is in their career. Within the operation of a company, a broader group of people is often involved, such as dramaturges, coaches, technicians and directors, whether permanently attached to one company or not. Performers sometimes also work as coaches, outside eyes or directors for other performers and companies in addition to their own work as performers.

Traditional circuses occupy a special position within the circus landscape. They often operate independently of the other players and have their own dynamics and needs. They are family companies that rarely work with performers who have progressed through youth circuses or professional training. They arrange their own ticket sales and promotion and address municipal governments directly to request pitches to place their tents.

New circus creations are achieved with a combination of forms of funding, such as subsidies, co-performances, Tax Shelter, own income from non-artistic activities and sponsorships, etc. Certainly for artistic activities that are not directly linked to a creation, it is more difficult to find funding – for example, preliminary research by performers is often subsidised with their own funds.¹⁸

¹⁸ Goffin et al., “Circusloopbanenonderzoek”, 69.

During this period, companies and performers seek not only spaces to make their creation, but also financial, technical, logistical and artistic support. Several players in the field fulfil (part of) this role. The circus creation spaces provide this essential support, both in terms of creations and for artistic experimentation. In addition, all four offer presentation opportunities through the organisation of festivals, performances and show sessions. The four circus creation spaces can only offer a limited number of performers and companies a residency spot and/or co-production budget, to both domestic and foreign performers. The Circus-Career Survey states that supply is limited and companies that are committed to showing a demonstrable result during a residency will find an advantage in obtaining a residency.¹⁹ In the next round of subsidies (2025), we anticipate an increase in the number of companies that will apply for structural subsidies; this may increase pressure on circus creation spaces.

In addition to circus creation spaces, there are numerous other places where performers and companies create and train, such as cultural houses during the (empty) summer months, but also gymnasiums, dance halls, private spaces, etc. In these kinds of spaces, there is not always support available – sometimes, it is just a space, for which rent often has to be paid, which increases the financial pressure on creations. Youth circuses often have well-equipped spaces, which is why they increasingly function as training and creation spaces, sometimes for a rental fee or subscription. However, some youth circuses clash with their limits here, as different users lay claim to the same space. In Flanders, there are also some 'performer-run spaces' – spaces managed by performers. (see Space & Infrastructure chapter)

Companies are not only seeking residency spots in Flanders; many are also going on residencies in Wallonia or abroad. These international residency spots support performers and companies by providing space, technical and logistical support and/or co-performances. In addition, many also offer presentation opportunities and access to their own network.

The public can encounter circus in a variety of ways. Circus is played in a variety of places: festivals, cultural centres and houses, events, cabarets or in companies' circus tents. The analysis of programming at cultural centres shows that circus is increasingly programmed, but not always under the heading of circus. Sometimes, circus performances also fall under labels such as dance, performance, family, or a combination of several categories.

Circus festivals are not only a place where the broader public is introduced to circus – they are also a meeting place for professionals. Through networking events, pitching sessions, meetings, etc., professionals connect and discover new work. For performers, festivals are a place to interact with programmers, bringing new playing opportunities.

Circus companies and individual performers often play at festivals and cultural houses on buyouts. With the exception of traditional circuses, they usually do not derive direct revenue from ticket sales. Often, they are responsible for selling their shows themselves, but they are getting more and more support from distribution agencies or booking offices.

¹⁹ Ibid., 70.

A company may have several representatives in different countries/regions, each playing a piece of the international market. Flanders has few distribution agencies that focus exclusively on circus. The seven distribution agencies named in 'Players in the Flemish Circus Landscape' collectively represent 22 companies.

All the players in the circus sector are affected by and relate to the policy. At the Flemish level, it is mainly about obtaining subsidies within the Circus Decree or other decrees. Many rules regarding labour law and the Arts Commission are set at the federal level and provide an important framework for anyone working within the cultural sector. (see Professionalisation chapter). For international collaboration, people often look to the European Union (see International Working chapter). Many circus actors have a more direct relationship with the local level. They are part of the local cultural and associative field, and so can claim support for finding and occupying infrastructure, for example. Cultural departments of municipalities sometimes organise events and festivals themselves, programming (local) artists and companies in doing so. Traditional circuses and circus festivals must submit applications to the local authority around the occupation of public domain. In doing so, circus actors sometimes clash with local authorities with little knowledge about and regard to circus.

Circuscentrum plays an overarching role within the sector and, as a support centre, is the link between the circus field and policy. It serves as a knowledge centre and provides support to the various players, promotes the development of circus arts in Flanders and facilitates collaboration and networking within the field. To this end, it develops its own open offerings and in-depth pathways, offering (targeted) advice. Finally, it assumes a crucial role in the visibility and promotion of circus arts from Flanders at both local and international levels.

The network lacks an advocate specifically for circus. Overleg Kunstenorganisaties (oKo) fulfils this role for professional arts organisations in Flanders and Brussels and acts as an employer federation and networking organisation. Circus performers and companies can join oKo, but the organisation focuses mainly on the Arts Decree and lacks circus-specific expertise. (see Circus in Society chapter)

The Flemish circus landscape has a strong international character. This is due to several factors: many performers have studied abroad; in Flanders, there are almost no places to play shorter acts; and circus creations often have longer play sequences, for which the Flemish market is too small. Flemish artists and companies are thus active at foreign festivals, going on residencies and seeking co-performances abroad. These international activities are crucial to their economic sustainability and artistic growth. There are several international circus networks and platforms that promote knowledge exchange and collaboration on specific topics. These networks offer Flemish players the opportunity to learn from best practices worldwide, establish new collaborations and gain inspiration. International conferences, workshops and exchange programmes serve as important meeting places where circus professionals from different countries can exchange ideas and make new contacts. (see International Operations chapter)

Because the circus network is covered by the Circus Decree as a single entity at the policy level, there is a strong connection between its various components: from amateur to professional, from heritage player to contemporary creator, and from young to old. As of today, the sector largely takes care of the training of its own professionals itself and organises training programmes for circus arts supervisors (BIC), circus entertainers and other pedagogical in-service training for this purpose. The youth internship ('Circus prep internship' – organised by Circuscentrum in collaboration with ESAC and UP) – provides preparation for auditions at circus colleges. Embedding within education, in turn, is small: both within the DKO, secondary art education, higher education, and academia, there is little focus on circus arts.

Flanders lacks higher education in circus, making opportunities difficult to engage in circus research within the Flemish context. Even within other courses in Flanders, both artistic and, for example, cultural management, circus is not addressed, or is very limited. Academic research around circus sometimes arises from a strong individual interest of a student or researcher, but a broader commitment and regard for circus is lacking.

Although both Circuscentrum and other players within the circus sector are committed to reflection and research, initiatives at the sectoral level currently remain quite limited. Experimental research processes are rather rare in the artistic field. While examples of research on the impact and role of circus education do exist in the circus education sector, circus has received little attention as a research area within higher education and academic circles.

The above text shows how the various players – from youth circuses and professional performers to distribution agencies and festivals – are intertwined and jointly contribute to a dynamic and diverse circus landscape in Flanders. In the following chapters, we will explore various characteristics, as well as challenges and needs within this system.

INSERT: Base of operations and operating area

The system outlined above provides a cross-section of the sector with general, overarching relationships. The complexity arises in part because circus organisations operate simultaneously at different (geographical) levels, which are both diverse and determinative for their specific operations. Within this structure, each organisation makes its own choices, regardless of their type of operation.

The base of operations is the geographical level from which an organisation starts. Some organisations start from a strong local anchoring, while others work on a basic Flemish level, or just internationally.

The operating area is the geographical scope for an organisation. Organisations may have strong local roots, but undertake supra-local, Flemish or European projects. Others have a regional base of operations, but work both locally and internationally. Subsidies can guide this profiling, due to conditions within the Circus Decree.

By looking at how a player presents itself (for example, as a Leuven youth circus or French-Belgian circus company) and the geographical area in which they operate, we can get a clear picture of the geographical scope within the circus landscape in the future. In addition, the base of operations and area of operation affect an organisation's operations, funding opportunities, image, etc. Organisations with a local focus find it harder to want to, or be able to, raise their profile at an international or even Flemish level.

Chart 24 is a potential visualisation of this concept. The base of operations is shown as a green sphere within a given geographical area. The arrows pointing to other areas indicate the area of operation. For example, Circuscentrum (red sphere) as a support centre for the Flemish circus sector is located in Flanders (base of operations), but we work at both the local and international level (scope of operations), which is indicated by arrows in both directions.

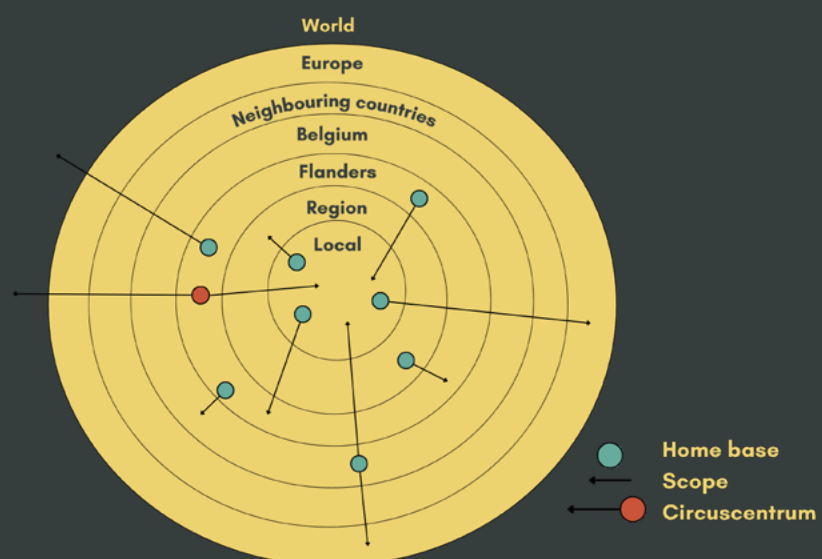
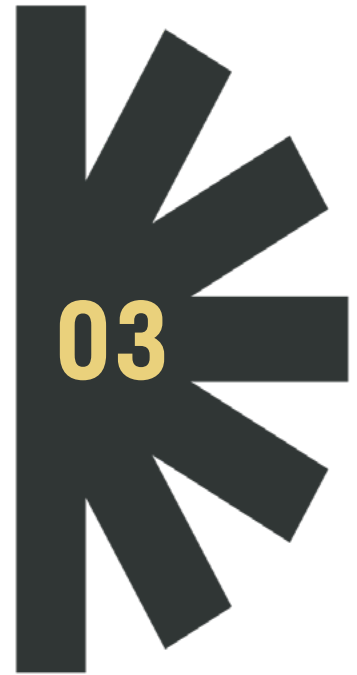


Chart 4 • Visual representation of geographical base of operations and scope

CIRCUS IN SOCIETY



This landscape sketch describes and analyses the circus sector, taking into account influences from the broader context. We consider in the environmental analysis below not only the relationship between circus and the broader cultural sector, but also with other policy domains, such as sports and youth, and wider societal trends and challenges. We will limit ourselves below to the most essential topics.

CIRCUS WITHIN THE BROADER CULTURAL SECTOR

INTERDISCIPLINARITY

In the arts, the trend towards greater interdisciplinarity is strong. The boundaries between different art forms such as theatre, dance, visual arts, music and circus, are increasingly blurred. Some circus performers and companies consciously seek crossovers with other arts and experiment with new forms. This is also reflected in the profile of performers, with some combining different artistic training, such as theatre or dance, along with circus.

We also see certain circus companies, which define themselves as interdisciplinary, applying for subsidies under the Arts Decree. Depending on their performances, they sometimes tend more towards one art form or another, contributing to broader artistic development within the sector.

This interdisciplinarity makes for some interesting artistic dynamics, but at the same time creates challenges, for example in communicating the offerings to the public. Circus performances are often labelled in very different ways, depending on familiarity with circus or what seems more interesting to a programmer's audience. The same performance is labelled circus, dance, theatre, family show, etc., or a combination of different labels depending on the context. The diversity of circus is not always known to a wider audience. Different labels for the same performance make it more difficult to communicate clearly about this. Because of the position and history an art has in a particular region, it often receives a different definition in other countries. Alexander Vantournhout explains that the performances by Not Standing would never be programmed as a circus in Germany because the link to variety shows there is much stronger.²⁰

Furthermore, there is a great overlap and connection between circus and street arts, and specifically street theatre. Within street theatre, performers employ many circus techniques. In many countries, street theatre receives policy recognition and support; street theatre is explicitly not included in the Circus Decree, although some subsidy applications are submitted for street performances. In an opinion piece in *Circusmagazine*, Bram Dobbelaere laments the lack of street performances by a younger generation of circus performers, who are more likely to create black box performances.²¹

Besides street theatre, there is an overlap with 'urban arts' and disciplines such as parkour and tricking. Young people encounter these techniques on the street and incorporate them into their artistic work. Several youth circuses are offering parkour classes today. Artists create performances that are founded upon tricking and parkour. Consequently, the boundaries of what circus is are still constantly changing.

²⁰ Katrijn De Bleser, "Alexander Vantournhout, aan de slag met hamer en vlag," *Circusmagazine*, no. 72 (2022): 34.

²¹ Bram Dobbelaere, "Pleinvrees. Opinistuk door Bram Dobbelaere," *Circusmagazine*, no. 75 (2023): 46–47.

ARTS

For several decades, the Arts Decree, along with its predecessors, has supported the arts sector. In 1976, the Theatre Decree was established, which evolved into the broader Performing Arts Decree in 1993. Within this Decree, organisations from theatre, dance, musical theatre and arts centres could apply for subsidies for a period of four years. 2004 saw a major reform, and the Arts Decree replaced the Performing Arts Decree and the Music Decree. The reformed Arts Decree has a broader interpretation and is open to different art forms. The Circus Decree is younger; it has been around since 2008 and it has only been since the 2019 reform that it became possible to apply for structural subsidies. These different subsidising frameworks affect the development of both sectors. Because the broader arts sector professionalised earlier on, some specific dynamics and relationships emerged. The circus sector is following its own developmental path and is at a different stage than the arts sector. As a result, the sector does not fully fit into the current system for the arts.

One aspect that plays into this is that the creation and performance time for circus performances is often significantly longer than theatre or dance creations, which puts great financial, logistical and human pressure on circus companies. Circus performances often play for several years in a row. Therefore, the rhythm of circus companies is different. At the same time, circus performers indicate that they feel more and more production pressure today, and are inclined to create a new production more quickly.²²

The more recent policy recognition of circus ensures that circus is often not yet an obvious presence, both within policy, within committees, and within the broader Arts sector. For example, too often, new/pilot subsidy lines are still only open to actors subsidised through the Arts Decree.

AMATEUR ARTS

The amateur arts field in Flanders is large and is supported through the Amateur Arts Decree, which covers the subdisciplines of theatre, dance, imagery and visual arts, music and literature. For each (sub)discipline, amateur arts organisations receive grants to support their own (sub)sector. Only for non-classical music (Vibe) and circus (Circuscentrum) does the support centre monitor both professional and amateur arts. Since ²⁰⁰⁸, circus as a discipline has been under its own Decree, which includes both the professional and circus education sectors. As a result, circus no longer falls under the Amateur Arts Decree. The First Circus Decree contributed to a stronger connection within the sector and the various parts of the circus ecosystem. At the same time, it requires extra attention to building bridges with other domains.

Circus as an amateur art is strongly linked in Flanders to the circus educational field and the small field of clubs.

²² Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 63.

Within theatre, dance and music, the circuit of amateur associations is far more extensive; many municipalities have a local harmony or theatre group. In addition, there are many people in Flanders who practise their creative hobby, such as writing, making music or singing alone. Research by De Federatie and OP/TIL shows that 44% of people in Flanders practise a creative hobby, either alone, in a group or within an association.²³ The latest edition of the Participation Survey found that in 2022, 29.60% of respondents practised a creative hobby at least monthly. Circus was not included as a separate category in this research, making it difficult to identify how widespread its practice is and in what forms it takes place (alone, in a club, youth circus, etc.).²⁴ This leaves the presence and position of circus within the amateur arts circuit insufficiently visible. This lack of visibility ensures that challenges and opportunities for the sector remain unknown and underutilised.

HERITAGE

Support for heritage is regulated within the Heritage Decree. In the previous policy period (2019-2024), former Minister for Culture Jambon recognised the importance of and challenges surrounding arts heritage.²⁵ This resulted in an increased focus on arts heritage through a pilot project and research around arts heritage service provision.

This research revealed several challenges around supporting arts heritage. One of the main problems is the decentralised system within both the arts and heritage sectors, which also applies to support organisations. This leads to gaps in support, especially when it comes to the transfer of legacies.²⁶ Each time, ad hoc solutions must be sought to preserve and transfer these valuable legacies. Within the arts, there is extra regard for artistic heritage, among other things, because of the obligation to care for archives for structurally subsidised organisations within the Arts Decree. In the Circus Decree, this is not the case.

Specifically for circus, a gap exists for the preservation of material circus heritage. The House of Alijn preserves and makes available a large collection around circus, but from its focus on everyday life, it does not have an active collecting policy around circus; the focus within the collection is on circus history, rather than contemporary forms of circus. There is currently no custodian for the archives of active circus organisations, meaning valuable collections sometimes disappear abroad.

As a national service provider for music and performing arts heritage, CEMPER is committed to supporting circus heritage, among other things. As a support centre, Circuscentrum takes a role in raising awareness around and regard for circus heritage. A future avenue that Circuscentrum, with support from CEMPER, is looking at is the inclusion of circus in the Flanders Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage, in order to raise awareness around circus heritage and to engage in the safeguarding of this heritage.

An additional challenge is that circus does not always fall within the broader framework of performing arts heritage. In 2023, the agencies involved launched the temporary subsidy line 'Pilot Projects for Legacies of Art Heritage' to support the handling of artists' legacies.

²³ Barbara Delft, Bart Verhaeghe, and Benedikt De Vos, eds., "Dit doet me wat. Amateurkunsten in Vlaanderen" (2020).

²⁴ "Participatiesurvey" (2022).

²⁵ Jan Jambon, "Strategische Visienota Kunsten," Maart 27, 2020.

²⁶ Jonas Rutgeerts et al., "Veldanalyse Dienstverlening Kunstenerfgoed" (September 2023).

At launch, circus projects were not eligible. Following consultation between Circuscentrum and DCYM, they recognised circus as a performing art and included this discipline in the subsidy line. In the end, Circus Ronaldo, in collaboration with Mechelen Heritage Unit and Circuscentrum, submitted a project that received approval. In addition, circus organisations cannot currently become a Meemoo content partner because this opportunity is limited to cultural organisations subsidised under the Arts Decree. This varying attention to circus within heritage policy and the heritage sector makes it difficult to engage in a sustainable safeguarding of circus heritage.

ADVOCATE

Circus does not have its own advocacy organisation, so circus companies and organisations have designated and limited affiliation with advocacy organisations that do not focus specifically on circus.

Overleg Kunstenorganisaties (oKo) is the advocate, employers' federation and networking organisation for professional arts organisations in Flanders and Brussels. "Organisations whose main activity is the creation, production, distribution or support for the arts, in the broadest sense of the word, can apply to become members of oKo."²⁷ Although circus organisations focusing on these functions can join oKo, its operation is strongly focused on the Arts Decree and lacks circus-specific knowledge. Currently, one circus company subsidised under the Circus Decree is affiliated with oKo.

De Federatie has been the advocate for socio-cultural adult work and the nine national amateur arts organisations since 2019. As mentioned above, circus falls outside the Amateur Arts Decree, so that also leaves this part of the sector unrepresented by an advocate.

For circus, there are also a great many specific challenges at the local level. To raise their interests, circus actors are again relying upon themselves, although this requires time, resources and knowledge. Specifically for traditional circuses, there is a big challenge here. Circuses rely heavily upon the goodwill of local authorities for their operations, but are not sufficiently equipped to take on this role properly. In consultation with the VVSG, Circuscentrum is committed to communication to local authorities around circus-friendly local policies, with regard for the specific position of traditional circuses.

The sector would benefit from a general advocate with circus-specific knowledge. As a support centre, Circuscentrum does not have the authority, time or resources to take on this role.

RESEARCH AND REFLECTION

Research on art and culture is regularly conducted in Flanders, covering a variety of fields: artistic, pedagogical, historical and management research, both culture-wide and within specific disciplines. Circus, however, often remains under-discussed in (academic) research. The relatively recent recognition at the policy level and the lack of a higher education course in circus contribute to this.

²⁷ 'Membership of oKo. 'General terms and conditions '(Overleg Kunstenorganisaties).

Existing academic research on circus often starts from the personal interests of students and researchers, such as Han Baeyens' recent thesis "Een Hoop-Vol Circus".²⁸ An important multi-year research project is 'The Circus Dialogues' by Bauke Lievens, which focused within the KASK & Conservatory of Ghent on artistic research in contemporary circus.²⁹

In culture-wide research, the representation of circus is often too small to draw specific conclusions. An example is the study "Loont Passie?" ('Does Passion Pay?') by Ghent University on the socio-economic position of artists in Flanders.³⁰ Due to the low response rate of circus performers compared to artists from other disciplines, no conclusions specific to the circus sector could be drawn. This was part of the reason for the circus-specific study 'Sustainable Careers for Circus Performers' conducted by IDEA Consult on behalf of the Government of Flanders.

The Participation Survey by the Knowledge Centre for Cultural Research, meanwhile, examined the participation of people in Flanders in culture, youth and sports four times (2004, 2009, 2014 and 2020). This study allows for only limited zooming in on specific participation in separate arts disciplines, making it impossible to draw any circus-specific conclusions. As cited above, circus was also not separately included as a form of leisure activity (see Amateur Arts).

Artistic research is often conducted by circus artists themselves, starting from their own practice. Sporadically, this kind of research is opened up more broadly, allowing for some higher-level reflections. A fine example of this is the research "Dating Objects and Devoted Obsession" by Border Case, from which its own lexicon has emerged.³¹

Within the circus education sector, research on the impact and role of circus education has been ongoing for some time, such as within the international project "Circus Clinic", in which Cirkus in Beweging, among others, is involved.³² "Circus Nomads", in turn, is a fine example of circus-historical research: Gwendolien Sabbe's project researches Flemish circus artists who worked in North America.³³ In turn, André de Poorter wrote several books on Flemish circus history based on his own collection.

Nonetheless, regard to circus research in Flanders remains limited and rather sporadic.



²⁸ Han Baeyens, "Een Hoop-Vol Circus. Een etnografisch onderzoek naar hoe de trainers van TaRMaK hoop faciliteren bij kinderen met een uitdagende thuissituatie." (Master's Thesis, KULeuven, 2023).

²⁹ Bauke Lievens et al., "The Circus Dialogues," n.d.

³⁰ Jan Ferwerda et al., "Loont Passie? Meting 2" (2022); Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek"; "Participatiesurvey."

³¹ Hanne Vandersteene, *Dating Objects and Devoted Obsessions* (Gent, 2024).

³² Vicki Pompe et al., eds., *Circus Clinic. An exploration of the therapeutic potential of circus.* (Leuven, 2023).

³³ Gwendolien Sabbe, "Circus Nomads," n.d.

CIRCUS IN RELATION TO OTHER POLICY DOMAINS & LEVELS

EDUCATION

The cultural-educational offering is broad and is contained in formal education (DKO and KSO), but also in the offering by cultural-educational associations, private teachers, an online offering, master classes and workshops, etc. It is a widely branched ecosystem with something for everyone. As indicated in the Description of the Circus Sector chapter, circus is not contained within the KSO (with the exception of the Lemmens Institute) and the DKO (with the exception of the Academy of Geraardsbergen). This means most young people come into contact with circus through youth circuses, family/friends or online. For circus, organised circus offerings (classes on a regular basis) are limited to those offered by youth circuses. This relatively limited supply makes the system more vulnerable. The loss of some youth circuses would have a major impact on the sector's influx.

Also, the lack of attention to circus arts within the existing higher arts education programmes has a major impact on the development of this art form. The weak embedding of circus within education also shows itself through the lack of a circus bachelor or master's programme in Flanders. Those seeking a career as a circus performer rely upon French-language training in Brussels (ESAC) or abroad. Several continuing education opportunities and pedagogical training courses are organised by the sector itself, without collaboration with or budget from education or other fields.

YOUTH AND SPORTS

Circus is not only a creative, but also a physical activity for children and young people, and therefore it interacts with several other fields, such as youth and sports. For example, at the local level, youth circuses can sometimes be recognised as sports clubs or youth clubs. According to Sport Vlaanderen figures, in 2023 there were a total of five registered sports clubs offering 'circus technique' as a sport – about one quarter of all youth circuses in Flanders.³⁴

These fields have different rules, which can offer advantages for some organisations, but at the same time, this also makes it complex. For example, within the sports sector, flat-rate expense reimbursements for volunteers are higher than within the socio-cultural sector.³⁵ Within the regulation around association work too, employees within sports are allowed to perform for more hours per year than within the socio-cultural sector. Youth circuses that often compensate their teachers as volunteers or within the scheme for association work sometimes find themselves in a grey area here. In addition, youth circuses are subject to regulations within youth, such as the requirement to appoint an Integrity Contact Point (API).

The Circus Decree provides space for the entire circus sector to develop further, but because of this, circus is not always included within adjacent fields. For example, circus (or specific circus techniques) as a sport is not included in research into sports practice.

³⁴ 'Sports clubs by sport' (Knowledge platform Sport Vlaanderen, 2023) [Accessed 23 September, 2024].

³⁵ "Verenigingswerk," Association work, n.d.

LOCAL POLICY

Circus organisations often encounter local policies: for subsidies, the occupation of public domain, access to local infrastructure, etc. Knowledge about and regard for circus at the local level is often limited and poses challenges for circus organisations.

There are some municipalities that do have a stronger commitment to circus or where local circus actors are organising to put circus on the policy agenda. For example, Leuven has been profiling itself as a circus city for several years, and is actively promoting circus players in the city through, among other things, the construction of the new Performing Arts Site, where circus will have an explicit place. However, there are not enough circus organisations in every municipality that can commit to this, which means a voice as regards local policy is lacking.

In recent decades, local authorities have implemented a gradual decentralisation within cultural policy. The 2014 internal state reform stripped the provinces of their powers over person-centred matters such as culture, youth and sports. The corresponding resources went to the local or Flemish level. The planning burden decree and the introduction of the policy and management cycle (BBC) gave authorities more freedom to shape their own policies. In 2016, the Flemish sectoral funds for local cultural policy came directly into the Municipal Fund, eliminating all obligations for the municipalities, and allowing each municipality to tailor to the cultural needs of its own population.³⁶

Following this change, it was feared that municipalities would make significant cuts to culture; for now, the impact appears to be limited and municipalities are continuing to invest in culture. There is no visibility on the proportion spent on circus within municipal budgets. In 2022, local authorities spent about 6% of their budgets on culture, an average of about 119 euros, although there are differences by municipality.³⁷ At the local level, organisations can request support in the form of project and structural subsidies. The 'circus-friendly local policy' process shows that local subsidy regulations are not always equally accessible to circus. Sometimes referring to the Flemish policy framework, such as the Arts or Amateur Arts Decree, the Circus Decree is not always sufficiently known. Within other regulations, a delineated list of performing arts is maintained that does not include circus.



³⁶ Benedikt De Vos et al., "Landscape Sketch of Upper Local Cultural Space Part 1" (2024).

³⁷ "Gemeenten Trekken Gemiddeld 119 Euro per Inwoner Uit Voor Cultuur," Defederatie, Maart 7, 2024.

RECENT SOCIETAL EVENTS THAT IMPACTED UPON THE CIRCUS SECTOR

Recent years have been eventful due to the coronavirus crisis, followed by the energy crisis and inflation. These developments posed some major challenges for both society and the circus sector. Successive lockdowns took a heavy toll on people and organisations, while rising costs created some additional financial pressures.

COVID-19

The coronavirus crisis and accompanying lockdowns had a profound effect upon the circus sector, coinciding with the start of the initial policy period for the Second Circus Decree. On 18 March 2020, Belgium went into lockdown for the first time; it would not be the last. Performances and festivals were cancelled, rehearsals became more difficult, international contact was almost impossible, etc. For a period of years, this limited the latitude for circus. "Art is not like a tap that you quickly open and close. It involves partners, time, scheduling, rehearsal space, artistic and framework staff. The crisis added revenues missed out on (buyouts, venue rentals, co-performances, etc.) and the depletion of financial reserves, generous support measures notwithstanding."³⁸

We note some trends that were reinforced as a result:

- **Accelerated digitalisation:** in the presentation offerings from cultural organisations, reflection programmes (panels, lectures, etc.), rapid digitalisation came about. During the lockdowns, there was little other choice. Audio and video became part of the communication mix, and are unlikely to disappear. At the same time, the challenges became visible – a digital cultural offering cannot completely replace live performances and willingness to pay appears to be low; not everyone is on board with digitalisation, and thus potential exclusion arises.³⁹
- **Increased precariousness of the circus professional:** the coronavirus crisis took a great psychological, economic and social toll. The restrictions on social contact, the cessation of (almost) all professional activities, the unpredictability of coronavirus measures, etc., dug deep into it. Especially for professionals who were already in a more precarious situation.⁴⁰
- **There was an outflow of talent in several sectors.** Especially for artistic-technical profiles, many people chose jobs with more security, and they did not always flow back at the end of the corona period either.⁴¹

During the coronavirus crisis, the Government of Flanders took some additional support measures: access to unemployment benefits was simplified for artists, an emergency fund was created for structurally subsidised organisations in the anticipation that these funds would flow through to artists and freelancers, cities and municipalities received additional funds for local cultural and youth organisations, relaunch funds, etc. However, these measures were little attuned to the reality of those active within the circus sector, which meant that circus professionals had relatively little recourse to them.

³⁸ Ann Overbergh, "Kunsten na Corona" (2021), 6.

³⁹ Ibid., 8–23.

⁴⁰ Ann Overbergh and Tom Ruetten, "Twee jaar corona in de kunsten: jaaroverzicht en stand van zaken," Kunstenpunt, April 13, 2022.

⁴¹ Ibid.

ENERGY CRISIS AND INFLATION

During the coronavirus crisis in 2021, the energy crisis arose. Several factors combined (a slow recovery of oil production, the war in Ukraine, climate factors, etc.) to contribute to a sharp rise in energy prices. High energy prices have been causing high inflation since 2021. Sharply increased prices for energy, food, rent, etc., plus labour costs, have made recent years financially challenging for the cultural sector; in 2022, the average annual inflation rate was 9.59%. In 2022, oKo appealed to the various governments in the country to take measures to arm the cultural sector against inflation.⁴² Within the socio-cultural sector, wages are indexed based on the pivot index; once it is exceeded, wages are adjusted by 2%. This happened five times in 2022 and once more in 2023.⁴³ The sharply increased wage costs increased the financial pressure on circus organisations.

In response to inflation, the Government of Flanders took several measures. Thus, it was decided to raise the inflation adjustment on the wage share of operating subsidies to 8% (from 4%) in 2021.⁴⁴ However, not all structurally subsidised circus organisations have employees who are salaried; many organisations work with (paid) volunteers and/or freelancers, limiting their official payroll costs. Hence, the impact of this support measure varied greatly from organisation to organisation.

A one-time intervention in the energy costs for cultural organisations receiving operating funds was also provided in 2023.⁴⁵ Since only a limited number of actors within the circus sector enjoyed structural support, only a limited portion of these funds flowed through to the circus sector.



⁴² "Arts sector asks for swift and efficient inflation support measures", Overleg Kunstenorganisaties, 9 September 2022.

⁴³ "Key figures for 2024. An overview of Belgium by numbers" (2024), 25.

⁴⁴ "Government of Flanders raises inflation adjustment for operating subsidies to 8% (of wage share)," Kunstenpunt, 3 October 2022.

⁴⁵ "Culture: Intervention in the energy costs for a cultural organisation with an operating subsidy (Expenditure Decree)," Verenigingsloket, n.d.

RECENT SOCIETAL MOVEMENTS AND EVOLUTIONS IMPACTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CIRCUS ARTS

Some major societal movements and evolutions pose significant challenges to the circus sector. This chapter highlights three of these movements and evolutions. How the circus sector responds to these developments is explored in more detail in the thematic chapters on Safety, Inclusion and Ecology.

#METOO

Several years ago, the #Metoo movement confronted the international cultural sector and wider society with the lingering challenges surrounding (sexually) transgressive behaviour. The specific trigger was the allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. The movement encouraged victims to share their experiences of transgressive behaviour. The movement also spread in Flanders, and there were some cases around well-known cultural and media figures. In the circus sector, circus professionals united in 2021 in the French circus collective #Balance-toncirque to address transgressive behaviour at circus colleges. (see Safety Chapter)

This movement increased attention to the consequences of transgressive behaviour and highlighted the urgent need for action and clear policy frameworks. Partly as a result of this, in 2023 the Flemish Reporting Point for Transgressive Behaviour was established, where anyone working within a context for which the Government of Flanders is competent (sports, culture, education, etc.) can report something.

DIVERSE SOCIETY

Our society is becoming increasingly diverse, which poses great challenges for cultural and circus organisations in engaging in accessible and inclusive policies. Barriers to participating in culture are related to a range of factors, such as socio-economic position, educational level, migration background, language, digital literacy, etc. Even within the relatively small Flanders, there are large differences between regions – the challenges around poverty, for example, are different in Brussels than in smaller municipalities. In this piece, we will briefly discuss some statistics about the Flemish population, based on figures from Statbel and the Superdiversity Atlas. We will deepen the relationship with the circus sector further in the theme of inclusion.

Migration background

The Superdiversity Atlas shows that people of 190 different nationalities of origin live in Flanders.⁴⁶ The differences by region are great; there are some superdiverse areas with a share of inhabitants of non-Belgian origin of more than 40%. Central Limburg (Genk), the border zone with the Netherlands, the outskirts of Brussels and large parts of the cities of Ghent, Antwerp and Leuven.

⁴⁶ Origin nationality describes the nationality of a resident, taking into account the first registered nationality of at least one of the parents.

All the urban areas in Flanders have seen an increase in the number of residents of non-Belgian-origin nationality in recent years, even in smaller towns.⁴⁷ Statistics Flanders figures show that, meanwhile, 21.6% of Belgians have a foreign background⁴⁸; 13.7% of the population does not have Belgian nationality. This growing diversity is related to rejuvenation. Generally speaking, the older the age group, the smaller the diversity, and the younger the age group, the greater the diversity. This hyper-diversity is forcing (circus) organisations to rethink their outreach, inclusion policies and audience operations, as they must deal with a multitude of cultural influences and customs.

Language

The wide variety of origin nationalities, combined with a strong international presence of expats, students, tourists, etc., in Flanders, means cultural organisations face a multilingual audience. This also presents challenges regarding language policy and communication for organisations that want to work to increase accessibility. Many cultural organisations therefore communicate in multiple languages; for example, Circusplaneet offers basic information about the organisation and its own contact details in eight different languages, including Turkish, Arabic and Chinese.⁴⁹

Poverty

Statbel figures show that in 2023, 12.3% of the Belgian population will be at risk of monetary poverty; these are residents living in a household with a total disposable income below the Belgian poverty line (€1,450/month), 10.5% live in a household where fewer than 20% work, and 6.1% are in a situation of severe material and social deprivation. According to the EU2030 strategy, people experiencing at least one of the above situations are considered at risk of poverty or social exclusion; for 2023, this is 18.6% of the population, or 2.15 million residents. Once again, the national figures conceal some wide disparities. In the Brussels-Capital Region, 27.7% of residents live in households below the poverty line, and 37.6% are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. In Flanders, the figures are 7.8% and 12.2%, respectively. Within the Flemish Region, there are still some large differences. Poverty rates are highest in Antwerp, where 10.4% of residents live in households below the poverty line, and lowest in East Flanders (5.4%).⁵¹ For individuals and families in poverty, higher financial barriers make participating in culture more difficult. Many cultural organisations are trying to address financial accessibility by relying on systems such as the UiTPAS or social rates. Many municipalities are also trying to lower barriers through cultural vouchers, for example.

Training

Statbel figures show that 50.20% of 30-34-year-olds had a higher education degree in 2023, with a striking difference between men and women; for example 58.50% of 30-34-year-old women have a higher education degree and 41.90% of men.

⁴⁷ Brecht Vandekerckhove et al., "Atlas Superdiversiteit in Vlaanderen - Toekomstverkenningen: Ruimtelijke verkenning van een superdiverse samenleving" (2022).

⁴⁸ Statbel defines this group as people of Belgian nationality whose own first registered nationality or that of their parents is not Belgian.

⁴⁹ "Languages," *Circusplaneet*, n.d.

⁵⁰ "Key figures for 2024," 17.

⁵¹ "Risico op armoede of sociale uitsluiting," *Statbel*, Februari 8, 2024.

⁵² "Key figures for 2024," 35.

Research shows that education level is a strong predictor of cultural participation. The results of the participation survey confirm this trend. Meanwhile, the participation survey probed the cultural participation of people in Flanders four times (2004, 2009, 2014 and 2020), with a random sample of the population. Because some groups in society systematically participate less, some potential biases were corrected by using a weighted distribution based on population composition.

The Participation Survey probed attendance at performing arts performances through two categories: Theatre & Dance and Show & Spectacle. Circus got a spot in the second group. The survey examined how often participants had attended a performance in the past six months. Overall, there was an increase in attendance to 52.4% in 2020; in previous editions, the participation rate did not rise above 44.9%. Specifically for Show & Spectacle in 2020, it was 35.4% of respondents, and for circus it was 5.8%.

Attendance was tested against several variables, including education level because "Education level is associated with social status and consistently predicts cultural participation in previous research."⁵³ Generally, we observe that an education gap exists: the more educated a person is, the more likely they are to attend a performance. In 'Theatre & Dance', the gap is mainly between highly educated on one side and middle and low educated on the other. In 'Show & Spectacle', we see mainly a difference between low educated on one side and middle and high educated on the other, with middle educated being about twice as likely to attend a performance.⁵⁴

However, the participation survey does not allow us to zoom in on circus, so we cannot draw any circus-specific conclusions (see Research and Reflection).

ENERGY, CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT

Global warming represents one of the greatest societal challenges of the 21st century. Humanity's impact on the environment is undeniable. Successive studies and climate reports show the significant impacts of global warming for humans. These impacts are large and diverse: we are experiencing higher temperatures, more heat waves, more extreme weather events, and a decline in biodiversity. In addition, these changes are leading to increasing food insecurity, more forest fires, more floods, and more migration.⁵⁵ At the same time, the growing attention to the climate challenge is also evident in international climate conferences, increasing political attention, the youth protests, etc.

The challenges regarding climate and environment are too broad to indicate all of them here, so some aspects will be briefly highlighted.

Having regard to environmental sustainability is not just about limiting one's own impact, but also about climate adaptation, preparing for the effects of global warming. One example of this is heat waves, which will become more and more frequent and intense in the future.⁵⁶

⁵³ Mathijs De Baere, "Trends in Podiumkunsten" (2021).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ "Causes and Effects of Climate Change," *United Nations*, n.d.

⁵⁶ Rozemien De Troch, ed., "Klimaatrapport 2020. Van Klimaatinformatie tot klimaatdiensten." (2020), 75.

When organising (outdoor) festivals and events, for example, heat waves pose a threat to the health of audiences, employees and performers. Organisations are therefore advised to draw up a heat plan that takes into account the provision of shade, drinking water, etc.⁵⁷ Not only heat waves, but also wetter and more extreme weather will cause (circus) events to need to be cancelled more often or organised differently.

To reduce the human impact on climate and the environment, governments are increasingly taking action. In recent years, disposable cups were banned, LEZ zones were introduced, renovation requirements were introduced, etc. In the coming years, it is to be expected that existing regulations will tighten and expand, and that new legislation will also be added in other areas. Meeting these obligations requires time, resources and knowledge, and making the right choice to comply with legislation is not always easy. (Circus) organisations must assess what the impact will be on their own operations and feasible solutions. Especially for small operations, there are (financial) barriers; the costs quickly rise when renovating older buildings and it is not always financially feasible to invest in energy-efficient lorries, for example. At the same time, financial support for ecological choices is lacking in many subsidy schemes.

Not only from policy, but also generally from society, there is increasing pressure on individuals and organisations to commit to ecological sustainability. For example, is distant air travel still really necessary or justified? Within the broader cultural sector, and specifically the circus sector, there is a great commitment to working for climate and environment; at the same time, good and neutral knowledge, time and resources to make sustainable choices are lacking.

Climate discussions are not isolated, but are inextricably linked to other challenges, such as inclusion. In making environmentally sustainable choices, we sometimes perpetuate inequalities between people and regions. A study by Perform Europe suggests that actions around climate, such as tighter restrictions on international travel out of ecological concerns, can reinforce inequalities between regions and promote artistic isolation. Touring by train is possible in regions such as Western Europe with an elaborate international train network, but impossible in many other regions.⁵⁸



⁵⁷ "Gezondheidsplan Warme Dagen evenementen. Een stappenplan voor organisatoren van culturele evenementen tijdens de zomer" (2018).

⁵⁸ Joris Janssens and Martina Fraioli, "Research Results of Perform Europe," Juni 2022.



THEMES

MOVING THE

CIRCUS SECTOR





01

Professionalisation

02

International work

03

Safety

The Landscape Sketch Circus addresses six knowledge themes: professionalisation, international work, space and infrastructure, safety, inclusion and ecology. In this chapter, we chose to zoom in on three themes we considered most relevant for an international audience: professionalisation, international work, and safety. Each theme identifies some crucial evolutions and challenges facing the circus sector. Since this is the first circus landscape sketch, we made some conscious choices in the selection of themes. We chose topics that tell enough about the uniqueness of the sector and what is going on there. The selection of these themes was based on discussions with the sector and was fine-tuned during the June 2022 Sector Day.

The themes were developed based on existing research, internal Circuscentrum knowledge and targeted focus groups. In the spring of 2024, Circuscentrum organised a focus group for each theme with professionals from the sector, in which we reviewed the initial findings and conclusions from the earlier research. The purpose of the focus groups was not to reach a consensus, but to expose the diverse views within the sector. In the theme texts, we interpret the various perspectives and visions prevalent in the sector.

Each theme text begins with a brief introduction explaining the definition of the theme and the reason for the choice. We then discuss the trends and evolutions by subtheme, and conclude with the main overarching challenges. However, the structure of each theme text differs. This is a conscious choice because the subthemes are different for each theme. For example, for safety, we started from the different forms of safety (physical, technical, psychosocial); for space and infrastructure, we chose a classification by function (creation, presentation, etc.).

The theme texts provide a starting point and a basis for further research and reflection. For several knowledge topics, there is currently little or no research available, so it was not always possible to work in-depth. Circuscentrum will draw up a concrete research agenda that will allow for more focused efforts to further deepen the various themes in the coming years.

This landscape sketch does not include a concrete research agenda, but at the end of each theme, we do formulate some 'suggestions for further research'. The suggestions for further research focus on challenges arising from a knowledge gap. They are broadly formulated and offer numerous opportunities for partial studies. These suggestions serve as inspiration for anyone wishing to engage in circus research.

01 PROFESSIONALISATION

In terms of professionalisation, the dynamic world of circus in Flanders is undergoing a fascinating evolution. Partly under the influence of the Circus Decree, the sector has grown significantly, and at the same time the Decree has brought about some shifts in the composition and dynamics within the sector. In addition to the effects of the Decree, the circus sector is evolving under the influence of the broader cultural policy framework, movements in the broader (international) arts field and general societal shifts. This presents some opportunities, but also brings some challenges and questions for organisations and individuals in all parts and layers of the sector.

Within the professionalisation section, we look at these evolutions from a business and economic perspective. We use the term professionalisation to refer to the degree to which individuals and organisations can make a living based on their circus practice, with a sustainable view towards the future.

Why this theme?

The challenges in terms of professionalisation in the circus sector are great. These include the development of sustainable careers, sound compensation systems and fair pay, diverse funding models for organisations, varied organisational types, flow within the sector and effective framing of circus professionals and semi-professionals.

Professionalisation in the circus sector is a complex theme. It means something different to a youth circus, a workshop, a young creator or an established company. In addition, professionalisation from the perspective of an organisation is different from that of an individual. The position partly determines choices relating to personnel policies and various compensation systems. We take into account the different perspectives and look at professionalisation from the point of view of an individual in the first part, for various profiles, and in the second part from the perspective of an organisation. Finally, we list the main challenges within this theme.

PROFESSIONALISATION FROM AN INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE

Circus professionals assume various roles as performers, teachers, technicians, programmers, coordinators and business leaders, often in different statuses. Many circus professionals combine multiple roles within (and outside) the circus sector, making for a dynamic and versatile career, but this comes with many challenges.

CIRCUS CAREERS

The basis and training opportunities

Many circus professionals first encounter circus in a youth circus, since circus is (virtually) absent from DKO or formal education (see chapter Description of the Circus Sector).

According to the Circus-Career Survey, 43.1% of the performers surveyed took classes at a youth circus.⁵⁹ Youth circuses deliberately focus on the broader development of young people and not just on learning techniques. They also offer initial stage opportunities through production groups, and organise specialist classes, intensive pathways, workshops and guest lectures. Besides technical, personal and artistic development, several youth circuses are committed to the pedagogical development of interested young people by leading them towards the existing training offering as circus entertainers and/or teachers. Several youth circuses allow young people to start as assistants, giving them the opportunity to gain experience, and to stay involved in the organisation on a voluntary basis.

A youth circus is not the starting point for everyone; some young people move on from hobbies with a similar technical basis, such as gymnastics or parkour. There are also those who are self-taught, who come into contact with circus through friends or the Internet and may or may not go on to further training. Within traditional circuses, young people are often trained from an early age by their own families and/or travelling performers, learning not only artistic skills, but also business, framing and technical skills, such as erecting and dismantling tents, building sets, welding and woodworking and promotion. Skills needed to run a circus themselves later on.

Young people looking to pursue an artistic career can apply for the young talent internship in preparation for circus college auditions. According to the Circus-Career Survey, students choose a programme based on the school's vision, their own circus discipline, the teachers present and financial considerations, among other things. Many performers audition at different schools and eventually end up at the school where they are admitted. (see Description of the Circus Sector chapter)

According to the Circus-Career Survey, 41.3% of respondents did not take a higher circus or performing arts course, although they often took classes at a youth circus. This usually refers to an older generation of performers – circus colleges used to be less well-known and accessible. In addition, some of the performers surveyed deliberately chose not to pursue higher education, e.g. because they want to focus on making street shows. Lateral entrants with other (artistic) profiles are often a little older and may not always be able to study at a circus college, given that several youth circuses have an age limit or discourage older students from starting studies.⁶⁰

Also, for other jobs within the circus sector, the supply of formal circus-specific training is limited or non-existent, hence broader training combined with experience within the circus sector. Within dramaturgy courses, the focus is often on theatre and dance; circus dramaturges combine this training with circus training or experience. Technicians often have different backgrounds too, such as training in stage techniques. And circus teachers sometimes combine other pedagogical training with training within the field (Youth Entertainer Course, BIC, FP) and experience. For business profiles too, there is little focus on circus as a specific sector within the Cultural Management course, for example.

⁵⁹ Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 32.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 35.

Career start and networking

After graduation, circus artists go to work as creators (creating artists) or performing artists; according to the Circus-Career Survey, most starting artists combine both options (52.2%), but 11.9% of artists surveyed work exclusively as creators at the start of their careers. According to the Circus-Career Survey, young artists start as creators with their own production out of necessity, to create some visibility in the field.⁶¹ Later in their careers, the relationships between the roles of creator and performing artist shift. Although most artists continue to combine work as creators and performers (59.8%), there is a larger proportion who identify only as creators (19.6%).

In addition to bringing out artistic work with their own company or with another company, some artists are also active as street performers or within event agencies. Within the courses, the focus is on creating short acts, but Flanders has few places where these acts can be presented. Some performers therefore work abroad during the winter season, in cabarets or variety theatres, and tour around with shows in the summer. Within traditional circus, touring families hire acts seasonally. Connections arise within a closed community, often by word of mouth or through specialist websites. The Circus-Career Survey shows limited overlap between performers working within contemporary circus or traditional circus – 7.8% of the performers surveyed work in both.⁶²

A good network proves crucial to building a career (artistic and otherwise). The Circus-Career Survey shows that contact with friends and other circus professionals is especially important in this regard. Circus professionals find much support from their network, and can turn to other professionals for questions. The Professionalisation focus group also cited that the distance between amateurs and professional artists is very small. At the same time, as a newcomer, it is not easy to find a place (as a professional) in the sector and that building up your own network with the right contacts takes a lot of time and effort.

Specifically, the challenge is great for graduate students, since they are often drawn abroad for their studies. The youth circus where they took classes themselves proves to be an important starting point for building up a network in their own country. This also applies to performers who first work abroad after graduation, with or without (their own) company, and only return to Belgium later in their career.

Several organisations are committed to supporting (young) performers, including giving them access to their networks. Festivals, creation spaces, arts and culture centres, Circuscentrum, etc. Through residencies, advice, networking opportunities, consultation platforms, etc., these performers and other circus professionals connect.

⁶¹ Ibid., 37.

⁶² Within the career survey, only two performers from traditional circus could be surveyed; figures on distribution may therefore not be representative.

Further development

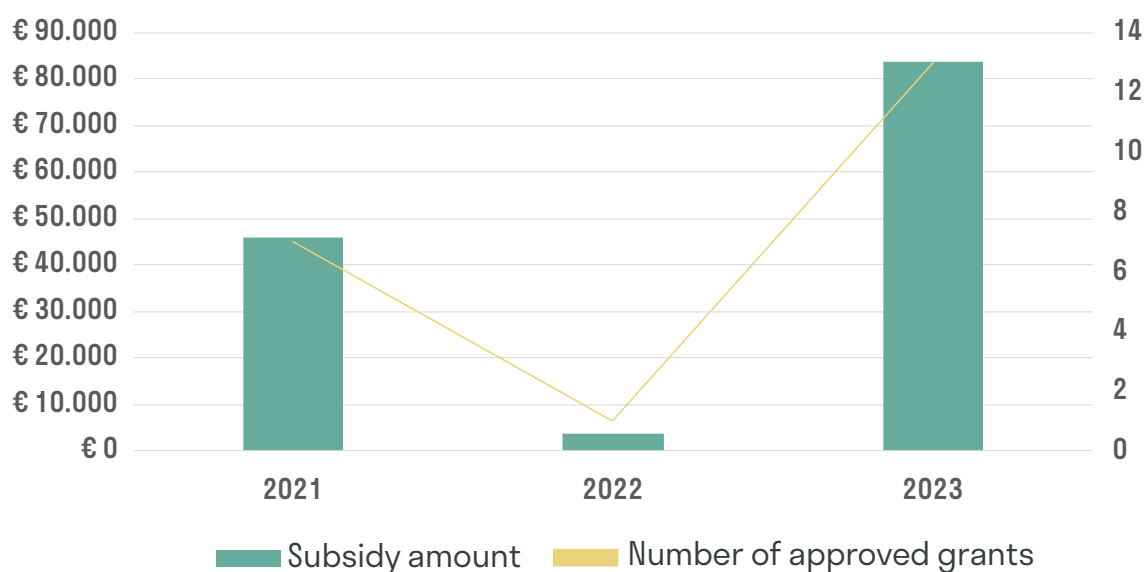
It is important that circus professionals can continue to educate themselves throughout their careers. There is a range of master classes, workshops and longer continuing education courses in the artistic, technical and business fields. One comment often heard is that these offerings are limited, especially for training and education programmes that offer circus-specific knowledge – a challenge made greater by the growth of the sector. In addition, making use of existing offerings is not always feasible, both in terms of budget and practicality.

Existing offerings are primarily developed and provided by organisations within the circus sector itself, while in other arts disciplines, some of the offerings are provided both in leisure time and formal pathways by educational partners. Often, only temporary project resources are available for the creation of concrete training, making it impossible to make a sustained commitment to competence enhancement. Within the circus education field, for example, Circuscentrum organises continuing education in specific disciplines or target groups twice a year, an offering developed in consultation with the sector. Some youth circuses provide in-house continuing education for their own teachers. At the same time, there is much knowledge transfer through informal contacts and on-the-job experience.

Within the Circus Decree, it is possible to apply for a 'Developmental grant for individual circus performers'. The grant serves to make (financial) room for artistic experimentation and continuing education. This may be interpreted broadly – courses focused on circus technique, dramaturgy and pedagogy also qualify.⁶³ The Description of the Circus Sector chapter went into greater detail about the grants awarded and their distribution.

Since 2021, the grant has been awarded 21 times. In 2022, however, significantly fewer grants were granted owing to the corona epidemic. (Chart 25)

DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIPS FOR INDIVIDUAL CIRCUS PERFORMERS



 **Chart 5 • Data DCYM – Subsidy figures – Kiosk fields – Developmental grants for individual circus performers (2021-2023)**

⁶³ "Developmental scholarships for individual circus performers."

Career end

The outflow as a performer from the field happens for various reasons, and sometimes is temporary. Within the Circus-Career Survey, several reasons come to mind: lack of financial security, the impact of the corona pandemic, injuries, inadequate performance opportunities, unawarded grants, an unsustainable work-life balance, too many non-artistic duties, and emotional strain. Life on tour is especially difficult to combine with a family life.⁶⁴ These factors can also lead to a final exit as a performer. The outflow partly depends on the discipline chosen; some disciplines are more physically demanding and lead to an earlier exit.

Reorientation to other jobs within the circus sector is a possibility, such as teaching, coaching, taking artistic direction of a company, or working within a circus organisation. However, the contemporary circus field is still a relatively young field; the first performers are only now reaching retirement age. As a result, many trends around the end of the career will not be evident until later on.

The Circus-Career Survey shows that in traditional circus, the older generation of performers used to receive support from the new generation. However, this support is becoming increasingly difficult financially, forcing artists to seek other work outside the sector.

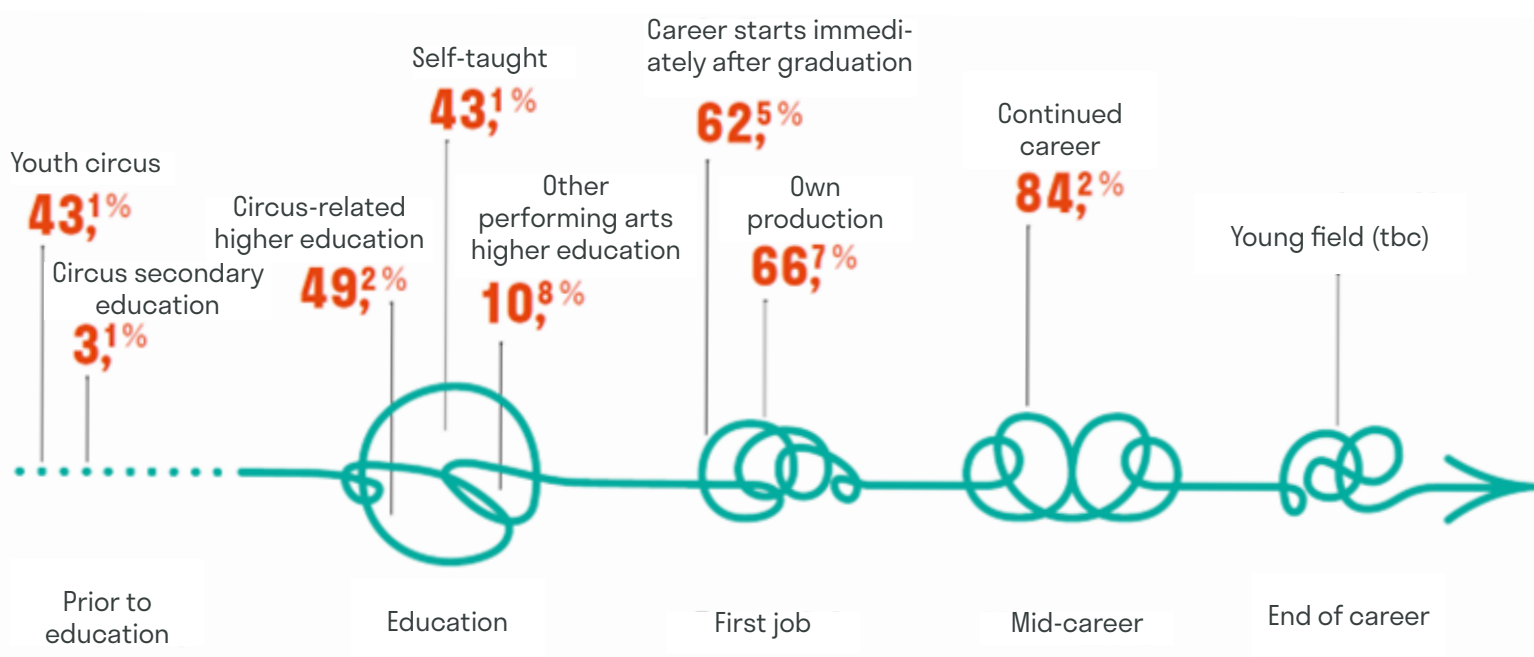


Chart 6 • Career Survey Visualisation – Career

⁶⁴ Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 51.

EMPLOYMENT

Statuses and compensation systems

Professionals within the performing arts sector can be compensated or earn an income in a variety of ways.⁶⁵

- **Pay for (in)definite duration**
- **Invoicing for (artistic) performances**
- **'Article 1a' of scheme:** exception to the social security scheme that allows artists to be considered employees when performing a task without an employment contract. Previously, this required an artist visa; now, an artist certificate is sufficient.
- **Small Compensation Scheme for Artists (KVR), now Amateur Arts Compensation:** the KVR is a flat-rate expense allowance awarded for providing artistic performance / producing artistic works on behalf of a client.
- **Grants**
- **Volunteers allowance**
- **Copyrights:** this is infrequent within the circus sector.
- **Compensation within association work**

Since artists often have a fluctuating income pattern with limited accrual of social security, this is why some exceptions exist within social security.⁶⁶

- **Artwork allowance:** unemployment benefit with application of the specific rules for arts workers.
- **Primostarters scheme:** allows for paying 8 quarters of reduced social contribution when possessing a self-employment certificate for self-employed beginners.

Professionals in the performing arts sector can be employed in different ways: as employees for a fixed or indefinite period of time, through a Social Bureau for Artists (SBK), or as self-employed (in a secondary occupation). Working through an SBK allows artists to work as freelancers under employee status, allowing them to accrue social rights.

The Circus-Career Survey shows that circus performers at the beginning of their careers mainly work through an SBK (40.7%) or without status (37.3%); 18.6% work directly with an organisation in employment, and these are mainly short-term contracts. These ratios shift later in the career, when the proportion of self-employed (in secondary employment) and performers directly employed increases. Full-time employment is almost exclusively possible with the larger companies with (structural) subsidies at home or abroad.⁶⁷ (Chart 27)

⁶⁵ "Vergoed worden voor opdrachten," *Kunstwerkt*, August 19, 2024.

⁶⁶ "Voordelen met het Kunstwerkattest," *Working in the arts*, n.d.

⁶⁷ Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 42.

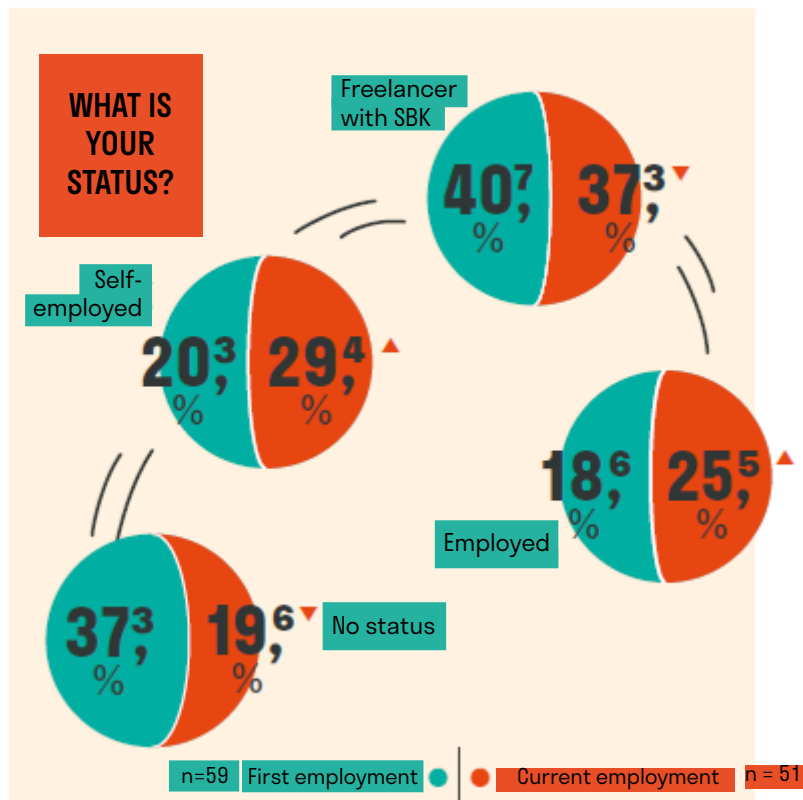


Chart 7 • Career Survey Visualisation – Status

The Circus-Career Survey shows that start-ups are primarily compensated through invoicing (including buyouts) (54.9%) and KVR (49%). Later in the career, this ratio shifts towards invoicing (73.3%). First-time performers were less likely to have artist status (15.7%) than performers later in their careers (26.7%). Since 74.1% of starters combine the job as a circus performer with another job, it is often difficult to obtain a sufficient number of days of artistic work to qualify for artist status.⁶⁸ (Chart 28)

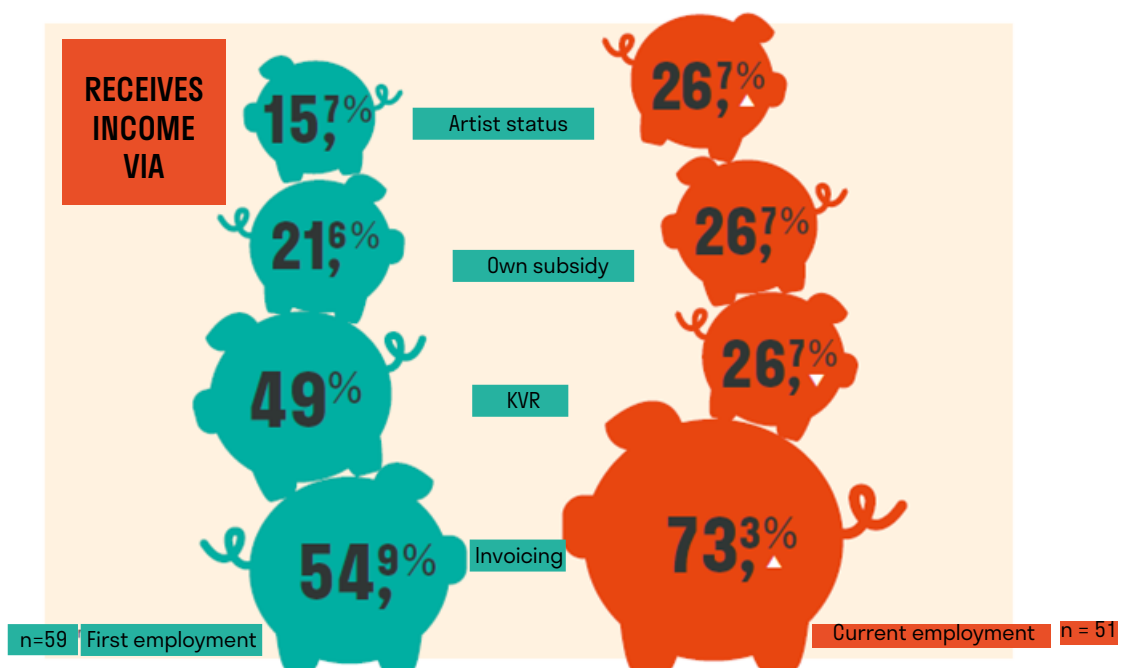


Chart 8 • Career Survey Visualisation – Compensation

⁶⁸ Ibid., 45.

Due to the varying patterns of income and compensation, circus performers are not always adequately protected. Several of these compensation systems do not contribute to the accrual of social security. Performers who drop out due to illness or injury and are compensated through an SBK, for example, will not receive compensation until the performer has worked for seven consecutive days. There is also no social security accrual through KVR; thus, start-ups accrue less social security. In an opinion piece in *Circusmagazine*, Bert Berg testifies about the choices young performers often need to make. "Time for a choice: 150 euros in the pocket from unrecognised work (KVR) or an interim contract with 57 euros real pay? Also imagine having seven of these assignments to make ends meet for a month."⁶⁹

Teachers also have irregular income patterns. Several youth circuses invoke the scheme concerning association work to reimburse assistants and teachers. In 2022, the regulations surrounding association work were amended and included in Article 17 of the NSSO Act RD. The old 25-day scheme is now covered by the additional work scheme. Within this scheme, individuals can be compensated through an employment contract for up to 300 hours per year, with a maximum of 100 hours per quarter. Under this scheme, there is an exception to paying social security contributions and a more advantageous tax rate, which reduces the wage cost for the employer.⁷⁰ However, individuals working under this scheme therefore do not accrue social and holiday rights either. Under the previous scheme, organisations could compensate employees if they were not an employer; this is no longer possible under the new scheme. Especially for non-structurally subsidised youth circuses, it is not always possible to become an employer and bear the associated administrative burden. Teachers and assistants sometimes volunteer their time and receive only an expense allowance.

For teachers, it may be important whether the youth circus has recognition as a sports or cultural club. Within the sports sector, employees may work for up to 450 hours per year; in the socio-cultural sector, this is limited to 300 hours per year. For sports volunteers, flat-rate expense reimbursements are also higher than within the socio-cultural sector.

An analysis of the staffing figures provided by the structurally subsidised youth circuses shows that teachers, administrative, technical and logistical support staff are all compensated in different ways. Sometimes as volunteers, through invoice or as agency staff.⁷¹

In January 2024, several reforms were implemented regarding compensation systems and social security rules. This landscape sketch is limited to the end of 2023, so the figures collected on compensation in the circus sector refer only to the rules valid through 2023. However, regulatory changes present both challenges and opportunities for the circus sector. The first major change was the introduction of the Artwork Certificate for art workers. Art workers provide artistic, artistic-technical and artistic support work in the arts. This expansion of the type of eligible work will ensure that more circus professionals may be eligible for the Artwork Certificate. Under the previous scheme, only artists were eligible. The Artwork Certificate gives access to the primostarter scheme and the 'Article 1a' scheme.

⁶⁹ Bert Berg, "Over erkenning, verloning & bureaubagger," *Circusmagazine*, no. 72 (2022): 46–47.

⁷⁰ "Work in associations."

⁷¹ DCYM data – Policy-relevant data

The Artwork Certificate Plus and Artwork Certificate Starter give access to the benefit rules in the unemployment regulations' the Artwork Certificate Starter has relaxed conditions for starters. In addition, the 'Working in the Arts' platform, which provides advice on the new scheme and where art workers and employers need to register, was established.

A second change is the reform of the Artists Committee, which was responsible for awarding the artist card. It was replaced by the Artwork Committee. Within the Artists Committee, there was ignorance of circus as a professional art form, which meant that performers' applications did not always receive approval. The new Artwork Committee is composed differently; it includes experts proposed by arts federations, trade associations and employer and self-employed organisations. In Flanders, there are no arts federations, trade associations or employer and self-employed organisations for circus, so no delegated expert with expertise on circus can sit on the committee. In Wallonia, Aires Libres is recognised as an arts federation; on the French-speaking side, however, an expert with expertise on circus can sit. It is unclear for now what effect this will have on the Artwork Committee's statements regarding circus.

A third change was the replacement of the KVR with the Amateur Arts Compensation (AKV). This is compensation for occasional, small-scale commissioned artistic work. Just as with the KVR, no taxes or social security contributions are due for this. The AKV may be used by people carrying out professional artistic work. Table 21 summarises the major differences between the two compensation schemes.



Table 2 • Summary of differences between AKV and KVR 0

AKV	KVR
77.22 euros + 22.06 euros / day per employer	128.93 euros / day per employer
Max. 30 days a year	Max. 30 days a year
Max. 7 consecutive days with the same employer	Max. 7 consecutive days with the same employer
Digital registration on 'Working in the Arts' (WITA)	Mandatory: Artist card
Assignment is registered by the employer on 'WITA'	Assignment is registered by its performer

Multiple job holding

Just like many professionals in the arts sector, circus professionals often combine several jobs.

As mentioned above, 74.1% of entry-level workers combine the job as a circus performer with another job; later in the career, this is still 56.8%.⁷²

⁷² Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 45.

This includes other jobs within the circus sector, such as a teacher, employee at a circus organisation, technician or production worker, as well as jobs outside the circus sector. There are some performers who consider being a performer to be their main profession, while others see it as a side business. Combining different jobs often comes out of financial necessity, but sometimes out of a genuine interest in both jobs as well.

According to the Circus-Career Survey, most circus performers (84.2%) are continuously employed as circus performers; however, they are not continuously gainfully employed. These periods are usually bridged through benefits through artist status or income from another job.⁷³ In traditional circuses, performers often stay involved for their entire careers with the circus where they were born or within their own newly founded circus.

Fair pay often remains a challenge; many activities that artists perform remain unpaid, such as training, administration, networking and writing up subsidy files. In addition, performers are not only responsible for their own work, but also that of a company. As business managers, they are responsible for all associated tasks, such as planning, logistics, administration, communication and distribution. These activities become possible through the investment of one's own time and resources, such as income from another job or previous performances, since not all of these costs can be reimbursed through subsidies.

But even costs that a subsidy can reimburse are not always included. The Circus-Career Survey shows that performers sometimes engage in 'self-censorship': they chip away at their own earnings in a subsidy file in hopes of having a better chance of getting a positive response.⁷⁴ Sometimes, these are offset through income from presenting work. Performers do charge for their own remuneration more and more. "However, this mechanism does not work for every artistic profile within circus. For example, a circus dramaturge is usually only involved during the creation period. The dramaturge does not go on tour with the show and therefore cannot claim any part of the buyout fee."⁷⁵

The youth circuses are also major players in Flanders, including as employers. Structurally subsidised youth circuses have more opportunities to take teachers on as employees. Since classes often take place in the evenings and at weekends, it is difficult to work full-time as a teacher. Many teachers combine this job with another job (for example, as a performer), sometimes within the same youth circus where they carry out administrative duties, for example.

BUSINESS SUPPORT

In order to expand their activities, circus professionals must engage in additional (often unpaid) work, such as administration, promotion, logistics, writing up subsidy files and managing a company. Circus professionals are often not trained for these tasks – in addition, working their way through the administrative, legal and legislative tangle is very time-intensive. Some circus professionals outsource (some of) these tasks; however, this is not always financially viable.

⁷³ Ibid., 50.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 60.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 48.

For starting performers in particular, it proves difficult to find their way. The Circus-Career Survey cited how circus training programmes pay little attention to developing this knowledge and these skills. And since most courses are located abroad, the knowledge taught is often not applicable to the Belgian/Flemish context. Circus performers do not always appear to be aware of their rights. When entering into agreements with programmers, for example, an official contract is not always drawn up. Consequently, performers do not receive any compensation if the organiser cancels a performance.

For a few years now, there have been more players focusing on supporting circus professionals, developing business skills and offering knowledge. However, demand continues to exceed supply, and not all supporting organisations have sufficient circus-specific knowledge. Circuscentrum as a support centre offers support in the form of consultations, writing tables, and information sessions on the Circus Decree, among other things. Where possible, it does this in collaboration with partners such as Cultuurloket. Here, extra attention goes to vulnerable players, such as starting performers. Some circus organisations offer business and administrative support. For example, in 2024, ECDF will launch a start-up lab where graduate students will receive mentoring within a paid internship, and where attention will be paid to the development of administrative and business knowledge.⁷⁶

PROFESSIONALISATION FROM AN ORGANISATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Circus organisations take a variety of forms; here, we look at the funding and organisational models of circus organisations. In the following piece, we will be talking primarily about circus companies, although these may consist of a single performer.

FUNDING MODELS

The circus sector in Flanders has a rich diversity of funding opportunities. While traditional sources such as ticket sales and subsidies remain crucial, there is a growing recognition of the need for stability and diversification through innovative collaborative models.

There are several funding options for circus organisations:

- Subsidies: within the Circus Decree, Arts Decree, Decree on Supralocal Culture, other forms of support from the Government of Flanders (e.g. VIA agreements), local subsidies, European subsidies
- Co-performances
- Buyouts
- Ticket revenue
- Partage (a portion of ticket revenue)
- Tax Shelter
- Revenue from the sale of food/drinks and merchandise
- Membership and class fees
- Sponsoring
- Funds and foundations
- Donations and crowdfunding

⁷⁶ "Start-up Labo," ECDF, n.d.

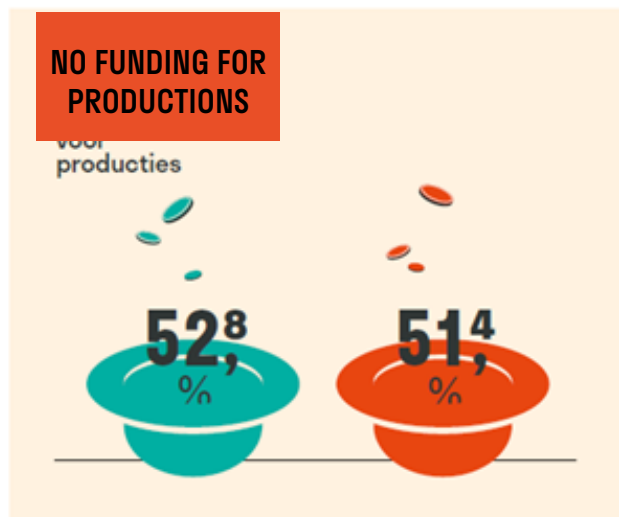
Here, we will first discuss the funding model for several types of organisations, then elaborate upon some general trends. In the chapter Description of the Circus Sector, we discussed in detail the applications for and awarding of structural and project subsidies within the Circus Decree. Here, we will discuss other funding sources and the relationship with subsidies from the Circus Decree.

Circus companies

Circus companies often have a diverse funding mix, with both subsidies, alternative funding and their own income.

An important consideration is that circus creations often have a longer creation and playing time. The longer creation period increases the financial pressure on companies, as well as the need for sufficient residency spots and co-performances. At the same time, circus performances often play for longer, not only to fund the longer creation period, but also because performances often do not feel 'right' until they are played enough.

 **Chart 9 • Career Survey**
Visualisation – funding



The Circus-Career Survey shows that about half of the performances in Flanders do not have any form of external funding.⁷⁷ (Chart 29) Performers/companies fund these performances themselves (through income from another job) or with the support of friends and family, often with the expectation of income from buyouts, which is then used to fund the next production. The other half of the performances do get funded through a mix of options – about a fifth use subsidies within the Circus Decree.

The Circus Decree is not the only option for subsidies. Some companies apply for subsidies within other Flemish decrees, such as the Arts Decree. According to the Circus-Career Survey, subsidies at the local or European level were used for about a quarter of performances. Local subsidies often involve modest amounts. In surveying for the Circus-Career Survey, there was no distinction between European or local grants. However, companies appear to apply for relatively few European subsidies because of the higher thresholds for submitting a file. (see International Working chapter)

⁷⁷ Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 49.

In addition to subsidies, companies fund creations with financial co-performances. Because co-production amounts are relatively limited, they often have to approach several organisations, both domestic and foreign, to obtain budgets for a creation. Coproductions often come from organisations that are themselves subsidised, whether within the Circus Decree or not. In addition, co-production can also be non-financial in nature (access to space, logistical support, etc.).

Obtaining co-performances is often an important factor in evaluating a subsidy file. Karlien De Savoye testifies about the challenges involved in an opinion piece in *Circusmagazine*. "The first tour is the begging tour. You're going to find as many 'partners' (that's a very vague term) as possible and visit creation spaces. The more gatekeepers you can enthrall for your project, the more points you get from the advisory committee."⁷⁸ Obtaining these partners is time-intensive and unpaid work. If the file is not approved, a performer has three choices: stop the project, postpone the project and go through all the partners once more to write up a new file, or fund the project themselves "Then the highly prized 'fair pay' pretty much irrevocably becomes 'no pay'."⁷⁹

New creations and maintaining the company and staff are often funded by buyouts. However, the Circus-Career Survey shows that when it comes to pricing buyout fees, fair pay is not yet always established. There appears to be a lack of standards and transparency, which creates a wide variation in what performers charge, and there is also a risk of underpayment.⁸⁰ Presentation venues are less able to programme at a deficit on an annual basis due to rising costs, among other things, which puts pressure upon the pricing of buyouts.

Direct income from audiences is a less important source of income for contemporary circus companies, and responding to partage happens fairly infrequently.⁸¹

For traditional circuses, however, ticket revenue is still the main source of income, since they do not work with co-performances or on buyouts, and rarely apply for a subsidy. In addition, traditional circuses face rising costs, such as more expensive pitches, energy costs and rising labour costs.

One form of alternative financing is Tax Shelter, which is a tax incentive that encourages investors to invest in the cultural sector. Between 2019 and 2023, it involved a total of 22 performances by 15 companies with an average amount of €53,000. These are mainly larger companies, including the three structurally subsidised companies.

Some companies are additionally focusing on diversifying their funding by renting out tents, for example.

⁷⁸ Karlien De Savoye, "Kunst zonder subsidies," *Circusmagazine*, no. 77 (2023): 46–47.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 59.

⁸¹ Ibid., 61.

Youth circuses

The eight major circus festivals are structurally subsidised; from an analysis of youth circuses' revenues, these operating subsidies make up an average of 30% of their income (see Description of the Circus Sector chapter). In addition to the grants in the Circus Decree, youth circuses use other grants.

Since the 2018 internal state reform, the provinces are no longer responsible for culture; the associated funds were transferred to the Government of Flanders and local authorities. At the same time, the need for support between the two levels remained, which is why the Supralocal Cultural Decree was introduced in 2018. As a transitional measure, there was a transitional regulation. Seven files were approved on both subsidy lines, from six youth circuses. Of these, there was only one file from a non-structurally subsidised youth circus.⁸² For small youth circuses, it is often not possible to cope with the extra work involved in a project. In *Circusmagazine*, some small youth circuses testified, "We are happy to be able to teach our classes and it would be good if we could also get all the necessary administration in order in a timely manner. The volunteers are already running out of margins, let alone adding another project. The money from such a subsidy goes purely to the project – for the operation of your youth circus, you are only left with washed-out employees after such a project."⁸³

In addition to Flemish subsidies, youth circuses also submit files at the European level. These are only structurally subsidised youth circuses, as these files often require time and specialist knowledge (see International Work chapter).

Before the reform of the Circus Decree, youth circuses received modest support from Circuscentrum. Since the reform, this basic support has fallen away and non-structurally subsidised youth circuses have had to rely upon local subsidies or their own funding. In an article in *Circusmagazine*, we read that this is insufficient support, "With the annual local support of – at best – 500 to 1,000 euros, it becomes difficult to survive, let alone 'grow' further and 'professionalise'."⁸⁴ Especially for the non-structurally subsidised youth circuses, this represented a loss. Circuscentrum additionally provided some administrative support that helped reduce costs.

Beyond subsidies, membership and class fees, along with registration fees for camps and workshops, are the main sources of income. The membership fee also includes the insurance premium for participants.

Increasing costs and an organisation that runs entirely on a volunteer basis means that many non-subsidised youth circuses are struggling to make ends meet and have little room to seek additional funding.

Festivals and circus creation centers

The four creation spaces in Flanders are all subsidised through the Circus Decree. Based on an analysis of the income of the Circus Creation Spaces, this is on average 60% of their total income.

⁸² "Gesubsidieerd organisaties bovenlokale cultuur", Department of Culture, Youth & Media, n.d.

⁸³ Katrijn De Bleser, "We moeten het dringend over de kleine circusateliers hebben," *Circusmagazine*, no. 70 (2022): 20–25.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

In addition, they often receive local subsidies; for example, Miramiro receives subsidies within the Gentse Feesten budget to organise Miramiro Festival. Since creation spaces often offer free performances, income from ticket sales is rather limited.

Festivals are often subsidised, either within the Circus Decree, other Flemish decrees or because the organiser – such as a workshop or cultural centre – receives subsidies. Many subsidised festivals offer (some of) their performances for free, so ticket revenue is often limited here too. For example, in an article in *Circusmagazine*, the organisers of MAD Festival and Cirque Plus indicate that their budget comes largely from subsidies, both locally and through the Circus Decree, and that ticket revenue is limited. At the same time, costs are rising. "From wages to rental materials, all the costs have increased significantly in recent years, but revenue did not increase in line with those."⁸⁵

Choice of subsidies

The purpose and operation of the organisation are important in determining how the organisation operates and its funding form. The focus groups and the Circus-Career Survey revealed that organisations sometimes consciously choose to be non-subsidised. The circus field consists of a combination of organisations, from small independent ones to large ones, working for large audiences or rather for niche audiences. The diversity in operations creates varying needs for subsidies.

Writing up a (good) subsidy file requires time and knowledge that not every circus professional has available. The lead time for a subsidy also does not fit within the 'working rhythm' for every project. Especially in artistic creations, some performers are looking for more room for experimentation. Project-based work brings challenges – for example, not all tasks, such as communication and administration, can be reimbursed from a subsidy. This, especially for organisations that run on a voluntary basis, adds to the burden.

The Professionalisation focus group revealed that working with structural subsidies has a different impact among different types of organisations. A structural subsidy can provide some breathing room for organisations to hire staff to carry out these tasks. However, the shift to being an employer also creates some administration and costs; not every organisation can manage this. Once an organisation hires staff, it reaches a 'point of no return', and can no longer scale to voluntary operations, making some level of professionalisation and funding also necessary.

For the youth circuses, a structural subsidy means life, rather than survival. It provides the opportunity to invest in a professional personnel policy, a safety policy, etc. Structural subsidies can also provide stability for circus companies. However, some companies make a conscious decision not to apply for structural subsidies because it does not fit their way of working.

⁸⁵ Gwendolien Sabbe, "Let's talk about the money - Cirque Plus & MAD Festival," *Circusmagazine*, no. 80 (2024): 34–38.

For example, Bram Dobbelaere explains that with their company Cie Pol & Freddy, they do not want to apply for any structural subsidies "That has to do with our project-based way of working. After playing a show for five years or so, we start to feel like doing something else."⁸⁶

Hypothesis: the leverage of structural subsidies.

Operating subsidies seem to create some leverage for attracting other resources. Organisations with staff can be more decisive in writing up subsidy files and other applications, and thus can combine different funding sources more easily than organisations without any operating resources.

An analysis of the financial data for the structurally subsidised organisations shows that all structurally subsidised circus organisations have received subsidies in the past policy period in addition to the operating funds from the Circus Decree. Thus, 11 of the 16 structurally subsidised organisations received Flemish funds beyond the Circus Decree, 13 received local subsidies and 5 European ones. With other forms of funding, such as Tax Shelter, non-structurally subsidised companies also make claims, although the three structurally subsidised companies were responsible for 7 of the 23 agreements. It is not possible at this time to solidify the hypothesis, since no comparison with non-structurally subsidised organisations is possible.

ORGANISATIONAL MODELS

A range of organisational models are possible within the circus sector. In order to apply for subsidies within the Circus Decree (and for many other subsidy forms), organisations must be legal entities of a non-commercial nature, such as non-profit organisations, municipal/provincial or social purpose companies. Within the circus sector, therefore, many organisations are non-profit organisations. Some organisations are embedded in a larger structure, such as Circus Workshop Dommelhof, for example, which as a public legal entity is part of a provincial government, or CIRKLAB0, which is part of 30CC.

According to the Circus-Career Survey, the restriction for legal entities of a non-commercial nature is sometimes perceived as a limitation. "This is seen as a difficulty by performers in the 'grey zone' between profit and non-profit: some of their activities are (potentially) profitable, which in principle allows them to function as self-employed. At the same time, that step is very big for many people: this creates a great uncertainty, which complicates potential applications in the Circus Decree."⁸⁷

During the Professionalisation focus group, it was noted that working within a cooperative structure can lead to economies of scale and efficiency, reducing costs and sharing difficult, non-reimbursed tasks. Collaborating with others also provides opportunities to exchange with peers. At the same time, circus organisations have a highly developed identity that they actively promote. Some organisations are afraid of losing this proprietary DNA within a cooperative structure.

⁸⁶ Gwendolien Sabbe, "Let's talk about the money - Bram Dobbelaere," *Circusmagazine*, no. 79 (2024): 26–29.

⁸⁷ Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 60.

In addition, this type of work also requires time, knowledge and communication to work well. Depending on the operation and purpose of the organisation, larger or smaller structures are more appropriate.

The youth circuses are investigating new forms of collaboration to move beyond the 10,000 participant hours limit. Some youth circuses also have partial collaborations that operate independently, but where certain business tasks, such as payroll, are shared. One example is Circus Punt in Sint-Niklaas, which falls under Circolito, yet still has its own operation.

BUSINESS SUPPORT

Not only circus professionals, but circus organisations need greater business support and framing. Professionalisation in the management of an organisation takes place in many different areas: financial management, revenue models, privacy, integrity policies, human resources, good governance, etc. This requires complex business, tax and legal knowledge and experience.

Especially at organisations that are project-based, it is difficult to address all these issues structurally. Hiring someone to take on the business aspects is not always financially viable. But even those organisations that can do so quickly run into the limits of their knowledge. During the Professionalisation focus group, it was cited that contact with peers was important for quickly asking questions and testing out choices. However, the circus industry has a shortage of professionals with business profiles. In an article with *Circusmagazine*, two business leaders stated, "As a business leader, you're expected to know a great deal in a lot of areas, with quite a lot of responsibility. And then, I think, wages in the industry are not that tremendous. I think that just leaves us very weak as a sector."⁸⁸ In addition, knowledge about the field and about the functioning of the performing arts sector is expected.

The circus sector has several distribution agencies that support companies in their tour planning and promotion. Distribution agencies have expertise, knowledge of places to play and an expanded network. However, the offering for circus remains fairly limited, and there are few distribution agencies that really specialise in circus (for an overview, see the Description of the Circus Sector chapter). The Circus-Career Survey states, "A few small management agencies offer tailored support to companies. The offering remains limited and the financial picture is not easily laid out for these agencies."⁸⁹ With the pressure on buyout fees, it is not easy for the distribution agencies to break even.

⁸⁸ Ine Van Baelen, "Esther Maas en Stefan Gevaerts stellen orde op zaken," *Circusmagazine*, no. 76 (2023): 8–11.

⁸⁹ Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 65.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FURTHER PROFESSIONALISATION OF THE CIRCUS SECTOR

- Within the circus sector, **financially sustainable careers** are a major challenge. Circus professionals face an uncertain and unstable income pattern, using a range of compensation systems. Many of these systems do not provide sufficient social protection. Moreover, circus professionals perform many necessary tasks that are not reimbursed. When writing up subsidy applications, circus performers consider fair pay, but risk censoring their own pay in applications. Structural subsidies have enabled some organisations to build up a professional operation and pay their employees correctly, but the proportion of structurally subsidised organisations remains limited within the sector.
- Circus organisations need a **diverse and healthy funding mix**. Circus organisations often have a diverse funding mix, a combination of subsidies, alternative forms of funding, such as Tax Shelter and their own income. For circus creations in particular, circus companies need to cobble together various sources, such as co-performances, and creations are still regularly funded by the income of performers from another job. Traditional circuses depend upon a large enough audience turnout. Non-structurally subsidised youth circuses rely primarily on their own income. All organisations face sharply rising wage and energy costs.

Suggestion for further research:

This LST took a look at the various funding systems within the sector and the distribution of subsidies within the Circus Decree.

However, relatively little is still known about the existing business models and funding mix for circus organisations, so it was not possible to write about this in depth.

Additional research could identify the current state and key needs and challenges.

- (Structural) subsidies offer organisations the opportunity to grow and professionalise, and they can employ business staff to write up subsidy files and look for forms of alternative funding that will allow them to professionalise further. This causes a **Matthew effect** within the sector. Certainly among youth circuses, the gap is growing between the larger structurally subsidised and the smaller non-subsidised youth circuses.

- There is a **need for business expertise** within the sector. Circus professionals are often not taught business skills in their training, but face difficult administrative and legal issues. Looking for the right information takes time and knowledge. Small organisations often do not have the resources to hire someone or outsource this work (in part). Overall, there is a shortage of individuals with a business profile. There are organisations that provide business support, but they sometimes lack the necessary circus-specific knowledge.
- The circus sector forms a **close-knit, but closed network**. Circus professionals draw a lot from their network; the distance between amateur and professional is small and there is a great willingness to share, allowing individuals within their network to ask questions. At the same time, newcomers cite how it is sometimes difficult to access the network, and that this requires a major time investment.
- **Roles are often fluid** in the circus sector. Artists are often creators, performers, coaches, (business) leaders, etc. Within youth circuses too, employees are teachers, riggers, administrators, coordinators, etc. This fluidity of roles means that circus professionals are often involved in all parts of an operation; at the same time, it creates a great deal of (mental) pressure.
- There is little to no circus-specific training within formal education, which presents challenges for the sector around **entry and progression of circus professionals**. There is no college education for circus performers within Flanders. At the same time, there is room for self-taught performers to develop a professional (artistic) practice. For many other professions, such as technician, dramaturge and teacher, there are no specific circus training programmes and, within existing broader training programmes, there is often no focus on circus. The sector organises several training programmes internally to address this shortage, but these depend upon organisations within the sector and often go unrecognised. Many circus professionals have built up their knowledge through workshops, informal contacts and experience.

Suggestion for further research:

The sector faces several challenges regarding the advancement of interested young people into circus performers. There is no formal artistic training for circus in Flanders. An investigation into the need regarding training could reveal the bottlenecks in the current offering. One possible research avenue is a feasibility study into a Flemish master's degree programme in circus.

02 INTERNATIONAL WORK

The Flemish circus sector operates in a strong transnational ecosystem in which actors are constantly making connections across borders. For Flemish circus performers, the international career often begins at the very start of their training, which they do abroad, since Flanders itself does not have a circus college. Many Flemish companies have an international composition, tour internationally, collaborate with foreign presentation venues and festivals, and develop artistically during residencies abroad. At the same time, Flemish creation spaces and festivals welcome international artists and programmers, resulting in an exchange of talent, expertise and audiences. Youth circuses work quite locally and regionally, but also involve international teachers and set up exchange projects for young people. Distribution agencies and booking offices build up both national and international networks and support performers in finding new (international) playing venues. There is also policy investment in the internationalisation of the sector.

In other words, internationalisation is not just about showing work abroad; it encompasses a wide range of practices. The Government of Flanders' Field Drawing of International Cultural Policy (2024) also emphasises this: **"This is about projects that can focus on creation, (co-)production and co-financing, presentation and distribution, but also on sharing knowledge and developing content, on research, criticism and reflection, on education and training, etc. These activities may take place locally or in Flanders, but also in various foreign countries: the neighbouring countries, Europe, or other continents. And the digitalisation and hybridisation of cultural practice also means that it is no longer obvious where these practices take place. They often take place in different places and dimensions at the same time."**⁹⁰

Why this theme?

For many artists and companies, an international career is a natural and necessary part of their work. According to the Circus-Career Survey, as many as 70.6% of Flemish circus performers and companies are active both inside and outside of Flanders and Brussels.⁹¹ The motivation to work internationally is multidimensional: actors in the sector work internationally due to economic interests (larger market and profile), artistic considerations (development during residencies and conventions) and network development. Moreover, for a niche sector like circus, it is often simply more relevant to join forces internationally for practice development and knowledge exchange. All this makes working internationally an indispensable reality for the majority of the Flemish circus industry.

Flanders also enjoys international prestige in the circus field through its Circus Decree, with a unique interaction between policy and practice. Few other countries have explicit circus policies. Circus often falls under the broader category of performing arts, where it is not always specifically listed as a separate artistic discipline. Internationalisation thus promotes both profiling and the exchange of knowledge and artistic inspiration in the Flemish sector, thereby contributing to the sustainable development of circus as an art form.

⁹⁰ Joris Janssens and Inez Boogaarts, "Veldtekening Internationaal Cultuurbeleid" (2024), 3.

⁹¹ Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 5.

THE CIRCUS LANDSCAPE ACROSS BORDERS

The circus landscape consists of various networks and subsidies specifically aimed at supporting the sector across national borders. This infrastructure offers Flemish circus performers, companies and organisations opportunities to present their work internationally, engage in co-performances and share knowledge with peers worldwide. Cross-pollinations take place in these networks that contribute to artistic renewal and strengthening of the sector.

"The development of international and European networks is sometimes attributed to the scarcity of circus policies (and resources for them) in many countries. This stimulated the development of international networks aimed at sharing contacts and networks."⁹²

However, Flemish circus actors are not all familiar with these networks and subsidy opportunities. Not everyone finds their way to international support. In this chapter, we therefore identify the main networks and subsidy opportunities to make them more widely accessible to the entire Flemish circus sector.

INTERNATIONAL CIRCUS NETWORKS

The Flemish circus sector is part of a wide range of international networks that support them artistically, educationally and organisationally. These networks facilitate collaboration, knowledge sharing and exchange. Below, we will discuss the main networks and the Flemish organisations participating in them.

- **European Youth Circus Organisation (EYCO)**

The European Youth Circus Organisation (EYCO)⁹³ is an umbrella organisation dedicated to promoting and supporting youth circus in Europe. Founded in 2009 by five European organisations, including Circuscentrum, by 2024 EYCO consisted of 12 permanent member organisations from as many different countries. EYCO now represents 450 youth circuses and 2,000 teachers, reaching some 540,000 circus practitioners in Europe.

EYCO facilitates collaboration and knowledge exchange between these organisations, including organising NICE (Network of International Circus Exchange) meetings and initiatives such as workshops, training, festivals and events that support the development and promotion of youth circus. The network is strongly committed to inclusion, diversity and responsible circus practices, and aims to strengthen the youth circus community in Europe. Flemish youth circuses are not direct members, but do participate in EYCO projects such as the Youth Forum and the Assistant Trainers Sharing Knowledge (ASK)⁹⁴ programme and Learner-Centred Learning (LCL)⁹⁵.

- **Caravan circus network**

The Caravan Circus Network⁹⁶ is an international network of youth and social circus schools across Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

⁹² Joris Janssens and Inez Boogaarts: "Annex: Sectoral analyses of Field Drawing of the International Cultural Policy" (2024), 4.

⁹³ "About," Eycio, n.d.

⁹⁴ "ASK-Assistent Trainers Sharing Knowledge," Eycio, n.d.

⁹⁵ "Learner-Centred Learning in Youth Circus (LCL)," Eycio, n.d.

⁹⁶ "What Is Caravan?," *Caravan Circus Network*, n.d.

Founded in 2008 by seven European youth circuses, the network focuses on leveraging social circus activities as an educational tool for groups with special needs and from disadvantaged backgrounds. Caravan supports its members by facilitating exchanges, capacity building and knowledge sharing, with the aim of strengthening the sector and its participants.

Circusplaneet, the youth circus from Ghent, has been a member of Caravan since 2019 and participated in the "Circus as an Intercultural Encounter" research, which explores interculturalism and decolonisation in social circus projects.⁹⁷

- **Fédération Européenne des Écoles de Cirque Professionnelles (FEDEC)**

The Fédération Européenne des Écoles de Cirque Professionnelles (FEDEC)⁹⁸ is a European network for professional circus training dedicated to the development and evolution of circus education. FEDEC was founded in 1998 and had 85 members in 2024. Although FEDEC is originally a European network, it also has members from other continents. FEDEC strives to support and promote the development and evolution of training, education and creation within the circus arts.

FEDEC supports its members by encouraging international educational exchanges, European mobility and promoting synergies with the professional circus world. In addition, FEDEC represents the interests of its members at both European and international levels and advocates for the recognition of arts education within the European political agenda. FEDEC operates as an international non-profit organisation headquartered in Brussels and receives co-funding from the European Union (see Subsidy Landscape for International Work).

- **Circus Arts Research Platform (CARP)**

The Circus Arts Research Platform (CARP)⁹⁹, established in 2017, brings together circus arts researchers worldwide. CARP is an initiative from Circuscentrum, CNAC (Centre National des Arts du Cirque – FR), CircusInfo Finland and the Centre for Circus Arts Research, Innovation and Knowledge Transfer (CRITAC) from the National Circus School (CA), among others. The platform aims to foster collaboration and make academic circus research, accessible through a unified public bibliography.

- **International Network of Circus Arts Magazines (INCAM)**

The International Network of Circus Arts Magazines (INCAM)¹⁰⁰ is an informal network of circus magazines dedicated to strengthening the role of media within the circus sector. Launched in 2011 with four magazines, the network has now grown to 22 magazines, both in print and online. INCAM works with academic institutions to develop a critical language around circus arts and increase recognition of the field. The network organises meetings and online exchanges to address international issues within the industry and share best practices. Circusmagazine is part of this network.

⁹⁷ Ophélie Mercier, "Circus as intercultural encounter," *Caravan circus network*, September 16, 2019.

⁹⁸ "The Network," *FEDEC*, n.d.

⁹⁹ "About," *CARP - Circus Arts Research Platform*, n.d.

¹⁰⁰ "INCAM," *INCAM - International Network of Circus Arts Magazines*, n.d.

• **Circostrada**

Circostrada¹⁰¹ is the European network for contemporary circus and street theatre, founded in 2003, with the aim of developing, strengthening and gaining recognition for these sectors at European and global levels. The network covers a wide range of disciplines, including contemporary circus, location-specific projects, visual theatre and art in public spaces. Circostrada had 135 members from 38 countries in 2024. Festivals, play areas, networking organisations and creation spaces can join the network. Companies, distribution agencies and schools can also become members, provided they represent a broad network of performers and organisations in their countries.

Circuscentrum is one of Circostrada's permanent members, but Theater op de Markt, Miramiro, PERPLX, Cirque Plus and CC De Spil are also members of Circostrada.

• **Circusnext**

Created at the initiative of the French Ministry of Culture, Circusnext¹⁰² (formerly Jeunes Talents Cirque Europe) has grown into a European collaborative project. Over the years, Circusnext has become an essential programme for the development of contemporary circus and the recognition of circus as an art form in its own right. It is considered one of the most important support programmes for emerging authors and creators. Circusnext acts as a European circus label: the creators, selected by a European jury, stand out for their individuality and creativity.

The network consists of some 30 partners from 17 countries united around the following objectives: detecting emerging talent and supporting new creations within a European partnership. Belgian partners in the project are: Theater op de Markt, PERPLX, UP – Circus & performing arts and Latitude 50.

A call is launched annually for which creators can submit their creation. Camille Paycha, Familiar Faces, Circus Cotton and Alexander Vantournhout have already taken the crown as winners.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR INTERNATIONAL WORK

The subsidy landscape for international work within the Flemish circus sector offers a range of funding and support programmes aimed at promoting international collaboration and exchange. These subsidies are essential for circus performers, companies and organisations that wish to expand their artistic activities abroad, bring about co-performances or launch international projects. Below, we identify the major subsidies and financial support programmes for international work. In addition, some industry players also receive ad hoc support from foreign posts or embassies. Moreover, given their international composition, certain Flemish companies choose to establish themselves in several countries, so they can claim financial support from different countries.

• **Circus Decree**

Since the Second Circus Decree, there has been a separate subsidy line for International Travel Expenses.

¹⁰¹ "Circostrada," *Circostrada*, n.d.

¹⁰² "Circusnext," *Circusnext - European Circus Label*, n.d.

With the subsidy for international travel costs, Flanders is aiming to give Flemish circus performances the opportunity to participate in foreign audience-oriented initiatives and increase their financial viability. The subsidy may be used for international travel expenses directly relating to a public presentation event. Only organisations with a legal personality with a non-commercial character and a registered office in Flanders or Brussels can apply for this subsidy. Organisations already receiving a subsidy within the Circus Decree as a youth circus, circus company, Circus-centrum or for organising a festival cannot apply on these subsidy lines.

- **Flemish International Cultural Policy**

Bilateral Collaboration

The Flemish Government and DCYM are strategically pursuing bilateral collaboration with priority countries and regions,¹⁰³ as part of the international cultural policy. These collaborations offer Flemish artists and organisations in the cultural sector, including the circus sector, opportunities to participate in ad hoc project calls. These project calls support cultural exchanges and collaborations between Flanders and the selected regions.

International Social-Cultural Work Initiatives

For the sectors of amateur arts, circus arts and socio-cultural adult work, the Government of Flanders provides subsidies for travel and accommodation expenses to encourage international initiatives. Circus organisations can apply for a subsidy for study visits abroad, for participation in international seminars or conferences, for consultations with international partners as part of European subsidy projects, and also for a visit abroad or the reception of a foreign delegation as part of an international bilateral exchange.¹⁰⁴

- **Creative Europe**

Creative Europe is the European Commission's seven-year subsidy programme (2021-2027), aimed at promoting international collaboration in the cultural, creative and audiovisual sectors. The Creative Europe Flanders Desk manages the programme, provides support for submitting project applications and organises annual webinars explaining the subsidy lines.¹⁰⁵

Circus organisations can particularly benefit from the European Collaboration Projects subsidy line, which provides funding for small, medium and large-scale collaborations between European partners. Projects should focus on transnational creation and circulation of European networks or on increasing the capacity of European cultural and creative sectors, addressing priorities such as audience development, social inclusion, sustainability, new technologies or the international dimension.

¹⁰³ Basque Country, German-speaking Community, French Community, Hauts-de-France, Morocco, The Netherlands, Quebec, United Kingdom, South Africa. "Bilaterale Samenwerking", Department of Culture, Youth & Media, n.d.

¹⁰⁴ "Internationale initiatieven sociaal-cultureel werk," Department of Culture, Youth & Media, n.d.

¹⁰⁵ "Culture", Creative Europe – Flanders Desk, n.d.

Circus Without Circus¹⁰⁶ and Unpack The Arts¹⁰⁷, for which Circuscentrum was project leader, received €183,564 and €131,271 in subsidies within Creative Europe, respectively. CASA¹⁰⁸ (Circus Arts and Street Arts Circuit), for which Miramiro was project leader, also received €140,188 through Creative Europe. Circus networks such as Circostrada, Caravan also receive funding through Creative Europe.

Culture Moves Europe

Culture Moves Europe is a mobility initiative funded by the Creative Europe programme and managed by the Goethe Institute.¹⁰⁹ This programme supports the mobility of artists and cultural workers within Creative Europe's 40 participating countries. The initiative offers subsidies for individual mobilities and residencies. The mobility programme runs until July 2025.

• Erasmus+

Erasmus+ is the European Union's seven-year subsidy programme (2021-2027) for education, training, youth and sports. The programme offers a wide range of opportunities for organisations and individuals to collaborate, learn and exchange internationally. Circus organisations can apply for subsidies for projects aimed at individual learning mobility and the development of educational programmes. Epos manages Erasmus+ in Flanders and offers support in submitting project applications, and provides information on the various subsidy lines.¹¹⁰ Further details and application procedures are available on the Epos website.

Especially within the circus education part of the sector, Erasmus+ subsidy funds have been successfully used on several occasions. (see International Work within Circus Education Organisations).

Erasmus+ Youth

Within the Erasmus+ programme, Erasmus+ Youth specifically targets young people and youth organisations.¹¹¹ This part of the programme supports international meetings, exchanges and collaborative projects for and by young people and youth workers from youth organisations in leisure time. JINT¹¹², the national agency for Erasmus+ Youth in Flanders, offers support in submitting applications and organises training and experience exchanges to help organisations make optimum use of the subsidies available.

European Solidarity Corps (ESC – formerly EVS)

The European Solidarity Corps is another important initiative within the framework of Erasmus+, which focuses on solidarity projects by and for young people in Europe. This programme provides subsidies for projects in which young people engage in community-oriented causes, such as volunteering, internships and jobs in a solidarity context.

¹⁰⁶ The European project Circus Without Circus gave eighteen circus performers and artists from other art forms the opportunity to experiment in duo. The project ran from 2020 to 2023 and participating countries were Belgium, France, Denmark and Croatia. "Circus Without Circus", Circuscentrum, n.d.

¹⁰⁷ Cultural journalists from all over Europe could experience a free four-day residency at a meaningful circus festival to develop a critical discourse, circulate their knowledge and nurture their role in respect of circus and our society. Spread over two years (August 2012 to February 2014), twelve residencies for ten journalists each time were organised at the project's European partners: the Copenhagen International Theatre Festival (DK), CIRCa festival (FR), Festival novog cirkusa (HR), Subtopia (SE), Halles de Schaerbeek (B), Finnish Circus Info Centre (FI), Circusstad Festival Rotterdam (NL), Humorologie (B) and Crying Out Loud (UK).

¹⁰⁸ Between 2015 and 2017, Miramir0 (Belgium), SirkusInfo Finland, Cirqueon (Czech Republic), FiraTàrrega (Spain) and Subtopia (Sweden) joined forces to guide professionals from the circus/street arts sector through the specific context of a given country. The project aimed to create job opportunities, promote exchange and learn about different cultural and artistic contexts.

¹⁰⁹ "Culture Moves Europe," Goethe Institut, n.d.

¹¹⁰ "Erasmus+", Epos Flanders, n.d.

¹¹¹ "Erasmus+ Youth", Erasmusplus n.d.

¹¹² "JINT," Jint, n.d.

Flemish circus organisations can take in young volunteers, interns or employees through the European Solidarity Corps, or help young people set up their own solidarity projects. JINT is also the national agency for the European Solidarity Corps and provides guidance and support for submitting project applications.

Circus performers generally remain under-represented in European programmes. According to several studies, this problem is partly due to a lack of awareness of available subsidy opportunities, but the administrative effort required in application procedures also plays a role.

"A lack of knowledge and the administratively demanding application procedures mean that smaller organisations do not make much use of these funding opportunities. According to a Panteia study, four in five circus organisations surveyed have never applied for European funds. Admittedly, Belgian circus organisations are taking advantage of European opportunities more than most other countries."¹¹³

"It requires considerable administrative effort. In particular, organisations with sufficient capacity and already established networks have the most opportunity to benefit."¹¹⁴

WORKING INTERNATIONALLY WITHIN CIRCUS EDUCATION ORGANISATIONS

Although youth circuses are strongly rooted in their local communities, some – especially structurally subsidised youth circuses – actively seek international collaborations to enrich their educational offerings and foster the personal and artistic growth of their participants. This international dimension revolves around meeting, exchanging and collaborating with partners around the world, leading to innovative pedagogical practices and cross-cultural learning. Working together across borders not only contributes to the further development of the sector, but also provides an inspirational and challenging learning environment for all those involved.

Their international network allows youth circuses to employ international teachers, who bring new perspectives and techniques to broaden and deepen educational offerings. Another example of internationalisation within the Flemish circus education field is the organisation of international circus conventions. These events bring together circus professionals, students and enthusiasts from home and abroad and provide a platform for sharing knowledge and experiences. Examples of these include the MAD Convention, organised by MAD Festival and El Circo D'ell Fuego, where various acrobatic circus disciplines are practised; the Belgian Unicycle Championship, a collaboration between Cirkus in Beweging and Unlimited Unicycle Crew, which provides a stage for unicycle enthusiasts; and the Konvensie, organised by young people from Locorotondo and Woesh, focusing on juggling and balance. These conventions attract many (international) participants each time and contribute to international networking for the circus sector.

Several Flemish youth circuses are actively involved in international collaborations and networks. In addition to participating in international networks (see International Circus Networks), Flemish youth circuses are also pursuing direct collaborations with foreign partners. Within the circus education field, the European Erasmus+ programme is proving to be a successful subsidy channel for engaging in international collaborations and exchanges.

¹¹³ Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 26.

¹¹⁴ Janssens and Boogaarts, "Sector Annex Field Sketch", 11.

Between 2014 and 2023, five structurally subsidised youth circuses from Flanders (Circusplaneet, Cirkus in Beweging, Circolito, Woesh and Circus Zonder Handen – see Photo) received Erasmus+ funds for a total of 22 projects, with budgets ranging from €4,000 to €100,000 per project. These projects mainly support youth mobility (20 out of 22 projects fell under 'youth mobility' or 'mobility of young people'), but also volunteerism (1 project out of 22) and strategic partnerships (1 project out of 22). Table 22 lists the various Erasmus+ projects in which a Flemish Youth circus was coordinator.



Table 3 • Overview of Erasmus+ Projects with a Flemish Coordinating Organisation¹¹⁵

SUBSIDY YEAR	TYPE	PROJECT TITLE	COORDINATING ORGANISATION	PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES	SUBSIDY AMOUNT
2014	Youth mobility	E-crobatics ³	Youth circus Circolito	BE, AM, ES	€ 9.316
2014	Youth mobility	International Circus Games Exchange	Cirkus In Beweging	BE, NL, UK, IT, IE, EE, DK, FI, DE, ES	€ 21.310
2014	Youth mobility	CircuSofia	Cirkus In Beweging	BE, BG	€ 8.825
2014	Youth mobility	Karavano Youth Exchange	Woesh	BE, FR	€ 10.608
2014	Youth mobility	Clowning around: humour as a tool for intercultural communication	Circusplaneet	BE, DK, UK, IT, DE	€ 22.646
2014	Youth mobility	Circus and Community - Feasibility visit	Circusplaneet	BE, AT, DE, DK, UK, IT	€ 4.845
2014	Youth mobility	Circus pedagogy as a tool for community building	Circusplaneet	BE, UK, IT	€ 14.850
2015	Youth mobility	E-CROBATICS ⁴	Circusatelier Circolito	BE, NL	€ 7.880
2015	Youth mobility	Circus pedagogy as a tool for community building	Circusplaneet	BE, DE, DK	€ 7.087

¹¹⁵ "Erasmus+ Project Platform" (n.d.). The Erasmus + Platform is an open data platform displaying all the approved Erasmus+ and Creative Europe projects. This table was prepared based on approved files submitted by a Flemish coordinating organisation.

2015	Youth mobility	E-Cirk	Cirkus In Beweging	BE, DE	€ 8.230
2015	Youth mobility	Vicirco	Cirkus In Beweging	BE, IT	€ 6.575
2016	Youth mobility	Circo Frost	Cirkus In Beweging	BE, AT	€ 8.580
2016	Youth mobility	Positive identity development through circus education: a key to a successful super-diverse society	Circus Zonder Handen	BE, PS	€ 36.261
2017	Youth mobility	Positive identity development through circus education: from acquired knowledge to successful practice	Circus Zonder Handen	BE, PS	€ 39.062
2017	Youth mobility	Circus Bremen	Cirkus In Beweging	BE, DE	€ 17.880
2018	Youth mobility	Circus Moves On	Cirkus In Beweging	BE, EL, NL, FI, HU, PL, SI, EE, CZ, UK, DE, IT, ES, FR	€ 28.215
2018	Volunteering Projects	Cirkusinbeweging welcomes	Cirkus In Beweging	BE, ES, SI	€ 20.380
2019	Youth mobility	CirkOOH! CirkAAH! 4.0	Cirkus In Beweging	BE, NL, IT, EL, CZ, EE, ES	€ 37.580
2019	Youth mobility	The keys to social circus	Circusplaneet	BE, HR, EL, MK, CZ, NL, SI, LV, BG, IT, PL, ES, RO	€ 22.015
2020	Strategic Partnerships for youth	Circus Clinic - The art of wellbeing	Cirkus In Beweging	BE, CZ, IT	€ 96.155
2022	Mobility of young people	Palestine and Belgium Create Influential, Reinforcing Connections Using Similarities Instead of Differences	Circusatelier Circolito	BE, PS	€ 54.854
2023	Mobility of young people	Palestine and Belgium Continue Influential, Reinforcing Connections Using Similarities Instead of Differences	Circusatelier Circolito	BE, PS	€ 83.556



Some of the most recent and largest budgets allocated are:

- **Circus Clinic – The art of wellbeing:**

The Circus Clinic project, a collaboration between Fondazione Uniti per crescere insieme (Italy), Cirqueon (Czech Republic) and Cirkus in Beweging (Belgium), focused on the connection between circus and mental vulnerability. By involving psychologists, psychiatrists and therapists, the project produced a handbook called 'Circus Clinic, the art of wellbeing'. This book explores a number of methods in which circus can help support therapeutic processes with children and young adults. It is not a handbook for therapeutic practices, but offers some engaging ways to think about how circus can contribute to participants' wellbeing through play, creativity, body awareness, connection and physical, mental and emotional exertion.¹¹⁶

- **Palestine and Belgium Create Influential, Reinforcing Connections Using Similarities Instead of Differences & Palestine and Belgium Continue Influential, Reinforcing Connections Using Similarities Instead of Differences:**

This initiative brings together six Belgian youth circuses, three of which are Flemish (Circolito, Circusplaneet, Cirkus in Beweging) and three from Brussels (Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles, Circus Zonder Handen, Cirqu-Conflex), and the Palestinian youth circuses. The project, which started in July 2023, began with an exchange in which 20 Belgian and 20 Palestinian youths came together in Palestine to create a circus performance. Although the intention was to travel through several Palestinian cities with this performance, the project was thwarted by the deteriorating security situation on the ground. In the summer of 2024, the second part of the exchange came about and 20 Palestinian young people came to Belgium to work with 20 Belgian young people to create a new circus performance and show it in a range of cities, including Brussels, Ghent, Mechelen, Leuven and Bruges. These performances provide a platform for young people to tell their personal stories, have their voices heard and speak out freely about the issues that affect them. Despite the harsh conditions in which this project comes about, it offers the young people a unique opportunity to catch their breath, grow and share their stories with a wider audience.¹¹⁷

In addition to project-based work, the **European Solidarity Corps** is an important tool for internationalisation within the Flemish circus education sector. Thus, between 2018 and 2023, Cirkus in Motion and Circolito were able to recruit young volunteers from all across Europe in 8 different projects through this programme. This not only provides volunteers with an opportunity to gain valuable experience, but also enriches the youth circuses with new perspectives and energy.

WORKING INTERNATIONALLY WITHIN THE PROFESSIONAL ARTISTIC PLAYING FIELD

Flemish circus performers have a strong international orientation, which we can attribute to several factors. Many artists pursue training abroad, while playing opportunities for short acts in Flanders remain limited. Circus creations are usually characterised by longer play sequences, but the Flemish market is too small for that. The international composition of circus companies reinforces this dynamic. In addition, circus performances are often wordless, eliminating the language barrier and facilitating the distribution of performances abroad.

¹¹⁶ Pompe et al., *Circus Clinic*.

¹¹⁷ "Circus ID: Exchange With Palestinian And Belgian Circus Youth", Circolito, 30 June 2024.

"This extraordinary mobility, whether within a country or across borders, is facilitated by the universalist spirit of the circus and the absence of language barriers that characterises it, enabling circus performers to make people laugh and move them wherever they are."¹¹⁸

In this chapter, we discuss the international nature of the employment of Flemish circus performers, the composition of Flemish circus companies and the creation and distribution of Flemish circus performances.

INSERT: Arteveldehogeschool Research

In 2024, Circuscentrum, in collaboration with students from the Arteveldehogeschool, conducted some extensive desk research into the international nature of circus companies in Flanders. This study identified the composition, creation and distribution of performances by 50 companies in 2023. These are companies that were listed on the [Circus in Flanders](#) website during the research period (February to August 2024), regardless of their funding status through the Circus Decree (see list in annex).

In this chapter, we present some results from the research. However, it is important to interpret these results with some nuance. The research is based on thorough online desk research, incorporating only publicly available data. In addition, the research focuses exclusively on the year 2023. This implies that companies that were primarily engaged in creation that year may be less well highlighted, while companies that focused more on (international) play may receive extra attention. Nonetheless, the results offer some interesting and valuable insights into the international functioning of the circus sector.

INTERNATIONAL EMPLOYMENT OF FLEMISH CIRCUS ARTISTS

Circus careers research shows that 70.6% of performers surveyed work both inside and outside Flanders/Brussels; 13.7% of performers work exclusively abroad. At the start of their careers, nearly one fifth of circus performers work only outside Flanders and Brussels. These are often performers who have studied abroad and are gaining their first work experience there.

Current employment shows that only 15.7% of circus performers still work exclusively in Flanders and Brussels – a significant drop from 40.7% at initial employment.

¹¹⁸ Richard, "FIA-Working Conditions," 34.

As their careers progress, more and more performers who started in Flanders succeed in breaking through internationally.¹¹⁹

Gaining a foothold internationally, however, does not prove easy. Performers often need the right contacts and are not always sure how to get started. Conversely, it does not appear to be easy for performers with foreign studies to build up a network in Belgium. Youth circuses play a crucial role in this: alumni often return to these youth circuses to connect with the Flemish circus landscape from there.

"Another thing I've heard, when you go to study abroad, you're there for several years. Then you do have a network in that city or abroad. That's not a problem if you stay there and tour internationally. But it is a problem when you come back to Flanders and you don't know anyone. Then they go back to a youth circus, often the point where they left, to build up a network there."¹²⁰

The sounding board group for the Circus-Career Survey did note that the return to Flanders and Brussels is easier nowadays than in the past. The new Circus Decree acts as a lever because it offers more opportunities to get started in Flanders.¹²¹

INTERNATIONAL COMPOSITION OF FLEMISH CIRCUS COMPANIES

The international nature of Flemish circus companies is influenced in part by the artistic training that many performers receive abroad. At the end of these courses, new companies often emerge, which therefore naturally have an international composition. The research conducted by the Arteveldehogeschool students (see Arteveldehogeschool Research insert) shows that, in 2023, only 24 of the 50 Flemish companies surveyed worked exclusively with Belgian performers. This means that more than half of the companies collaborated with performers of different nationalities in their performances. It is important to note that 13 of those 24 companies consist of only one (Flemish) performer, which further nuances the limited national composition. The remaining 26 companies had at least one performer of another nationality, highlighting the diversity within the Flemish circus sector. The other nationalities represented in the artistic profiles within Flemish circus companies in 2023 include Dutch, French, Argentinian, Spanish, Swiss, Australian, Austrian, Bulgarian, Finnish, German, Guinean, Italian, Portuguese, Mexican, British, Swedish, Danish, Irish, Polish and Taiwanese. This wide range of backgrounds reflects the international scope and appeal of the Flemish circus sector.

INTERNATIONAL CREATION OF FLEMISH CIRCUS PERFORMANCES

Flemish circus companies are increasingly seeking international locations for their residencies and creation processes. There are various reasons for this. On the one hand, there is the lack of suitable residential space in Flanders (see also the 'Space and Infrastructure' chapter).

¹¹⁹ Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 44.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 79.

¹²¹ Ibid., 44.

On the other, foreign residency spots provide access to new networks and distribution opportunities, which is crucial to the success of their performances.

In addition, performers and companies regularly turn to international partners for playing opportunities and co-production options. There is a growing trend of international financial co-performances, with festivals, arts centres and companies working together to facilitate contemporary circus performances.

"The (international) network of organisations involved in the (co-)production and presentation of contemporary circus performances has grown significantly in recent years. This opens up opportunities for the sustainable development of circus organisations and the careers of circus performers."¹²²

The Arteveldehogeschool research shows that in 2023, the 50 companies surveyed collectively went into residency in more than 75 places, of which no fewer than 39 (51%) were abroad. The most popular foreign destinations for creation are France, the Netherlands, Wallonia¹²³ and Germany, but countries such as Spain, Sweden, Finland and Portugal are also on this list.

In the Space and Infrastructure chapter, we take a closer look at residency spots in Flanders.

INTERNATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF FLEMISH CIRCUS PERFORMANCES

The international nature of the Flemish circus sector is evidenced by the worldwide distribution of its performances. Circus companies and performers are increasingly working across borders, and circus is seen – alongside dance and street art – as among the disciplines with the greatest international reach.

"Apart from [] geographical imbalances, we also observed some key differences between the performing arts disciplines. Professionals working in dance, circus and street arts have a slightly more international outreach than their theatre counterparts."¹²⁴

"Similar insights are drawn from the comparison between artistic disciplines: circus and street art is still the discipline with the largest number of presenters for which more than 50% of the performances hosted are cross-border (27%), followed by dance (23%) and theatre (18%)."¹²⁵

In 2018, *Cirq'onstances II*¹²⁶ identified the distribution of 18 Flemish companies – which at that time had already applied for or received subsidies at least once through the Circus Decree – for the period 2009-2017. The study confirmed the international reach of the Flemish circus sector, with as many as 60% of its performances outside its home country. France proved to be the main outlet, with 27% of international performances, followed by the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Austria, the United Kingdom, Denmark and Switzerland. Australia took sixth place as the only non-European country.

¹²² Ibid., 18.

¹²³ Wallonia is considered 'foreign' due to the division of cultural policy in Belgium.

¹²⁴ Janssens and Fraioli, "Results of Perform Europe," 5.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹²⁶ Allary et al., *Cirq'onstances II*.

The Arteveldehogeschool research (see insert above) provides some new insights that confirm and update both the extent and distribution of this international activity. Their study found that the 50 Flemish circus companies surveyed in 2023 were operating in more than 600 unique venues across 26 countries (mainly in Europe¹²⁷). (Charts 30 and 31)

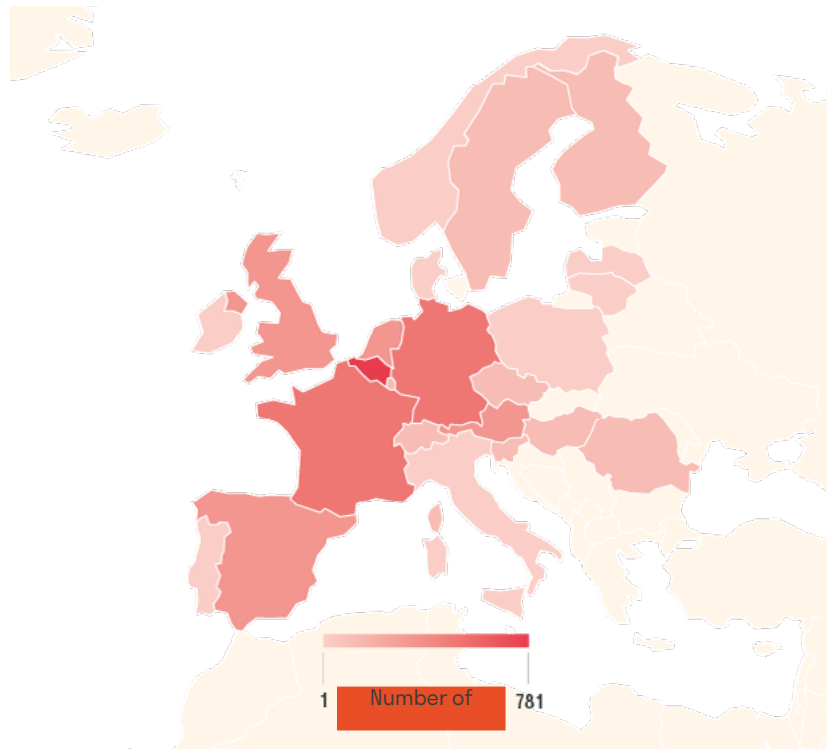


Chart 10 • Geographical Distribution for 2023 – Europe

shows

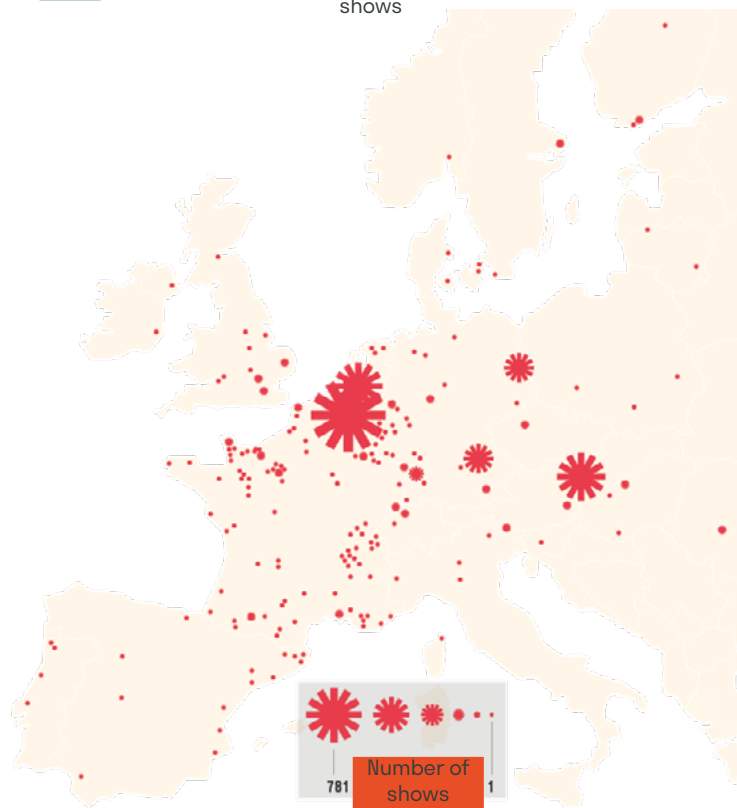


Chart 11 • Geographical Distribution for 2023 – Europe – Cities x number of performances

¹²⁷ Exceptions to this are Amoukanama, which played in America, and Grensgeval, which played in China

The proportions of national (39%) and international (61%) performances in 2023 are consistent with earlier findings, but the recent figures allow for sketching a more refined picture of the distribution by country and the international reach of the Flemish circus community.¹²⁸ Thus, France remains the most important foreign market with 15% of total performances, representing about one quarter of all foreign performances. (Charts 32 and 33)

TOP 10 (FOREIGN) MARKETS 2023 BY NUMBER OF PERFORMANCES

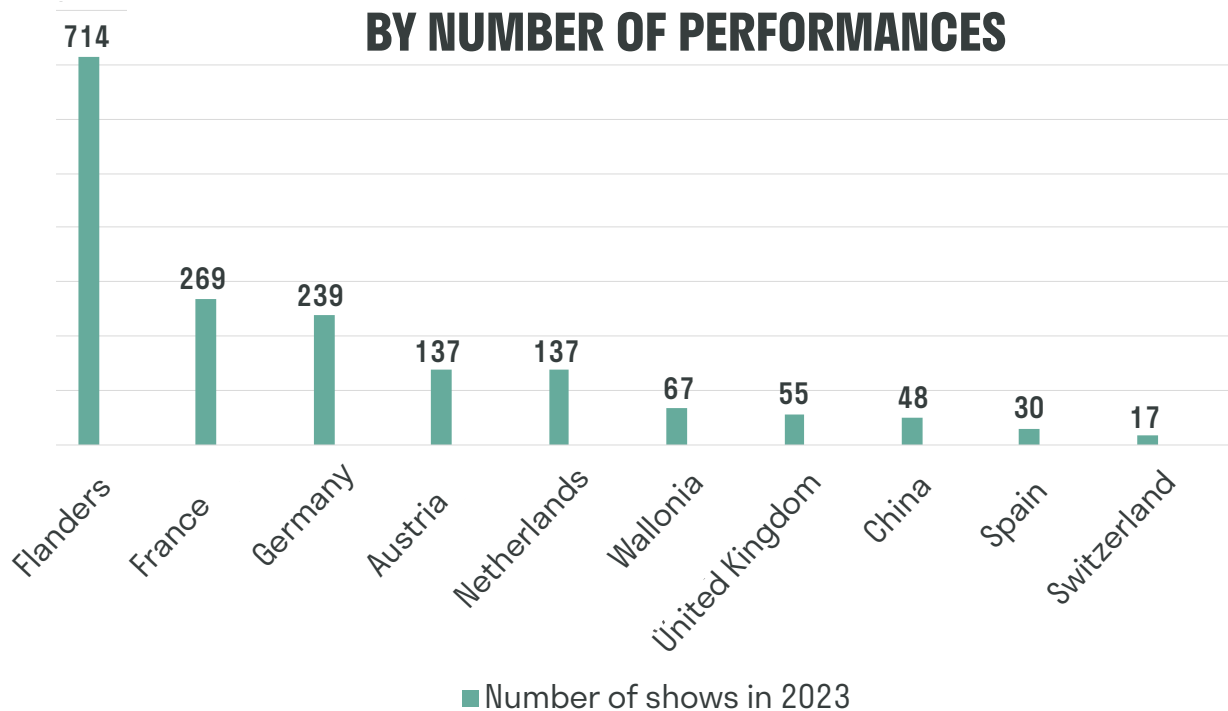


Chart 12 • Arteveldehogeschool Research – Top 10 (foreign) markets 2023 by number of performances

TOP 10 (FOREIGN) MARKETS 2023 BY NUMBER OF PERFORMANCES (%)

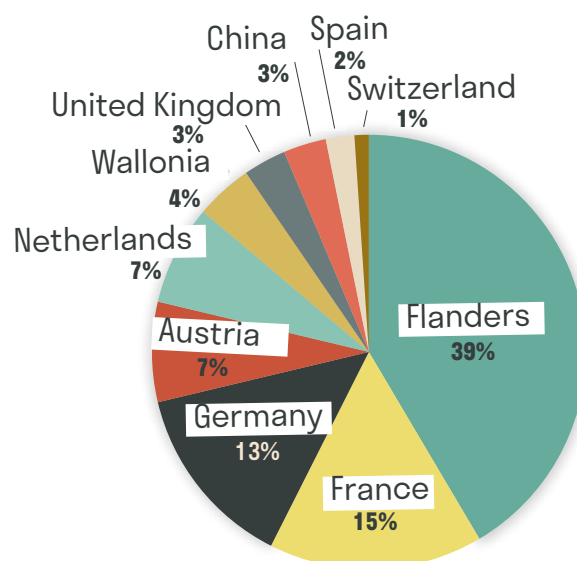


Chart 13 • Arteveldehogeschool Research – Top 10 (foreign) markets 2023 by number of performances (%)

¹²⁸ Flanders and Wallonia are considered separately in further analysis. National implies Flanders here; Wallonia is labelled 'international'/'foreign' here due to the division of cultural policy in Belgium.

Other key European markets include Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, while further afield, China is also on the radar, albeit with some nuance: only one company* played there in 2023. These findings highlight the fact that Flemish circus performers manage to reach audiences in different countries. Here, it is notable that Wallonia only ranks sixth, and remains difficult for Flemish artists to access. The Circus-Career Survey also confirms this, where we read that in terms of circus activities, there seems to be a clear boundary between Flanders and Wallonia.¹²⁹

* An analysis of the number of unique companies that played by country shows that only one company (Grensgeval) played in China. So a look at the number of unique companies per country provides some nuance and results in the top 10 below with only European countries (Chart 34):

TOP 10 (FOREIGN) MARKETS 2023 BASED ON UNIQUE COMPANIES

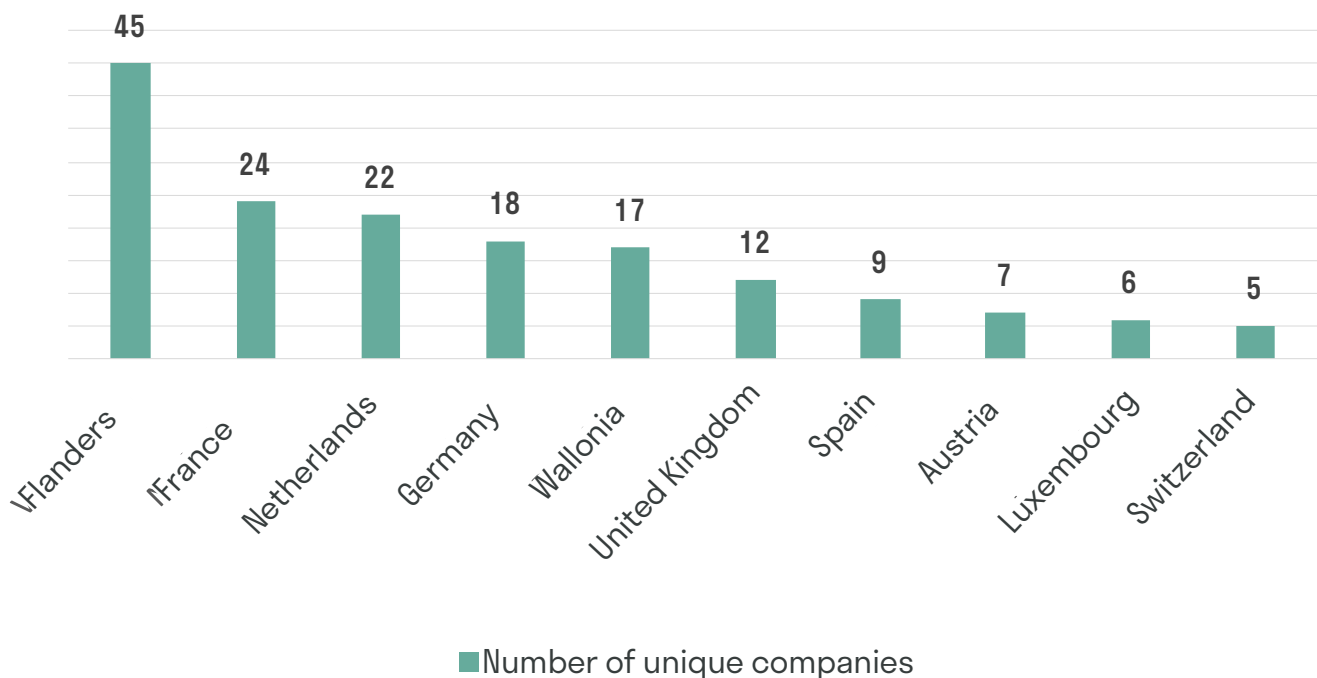


Chart 14 • Arteveldehogeschool Research – Top 10 (foreign) markets 2023 by unique companies

Although some countries change positions, it is the same countries that fill the top 10. Luxembourg replaces China, representing the four neighbouring countries.

Even in a de-duplicated version, where each production counts only once per unique location, we get a more nuanced picture of the international distribution. In this case, each venue at which a production is staged counts only once, regardless of the number of showings at that venue. This de-duplicated view provides the top 10 below (Chart 35): France is again in 2nd place, followed (by a large margin) by the Netherlands and Germany. Wallonia is just in the top five, but with only one tenth the number of unique performances per unique location in Flanders.

¹²⁹ Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 45.

TOP 10 (FOREIGN) MARKETS FOR 2023 BASED ON UNIQUE PERFORMANCES PER COUNTRY PER VENUE

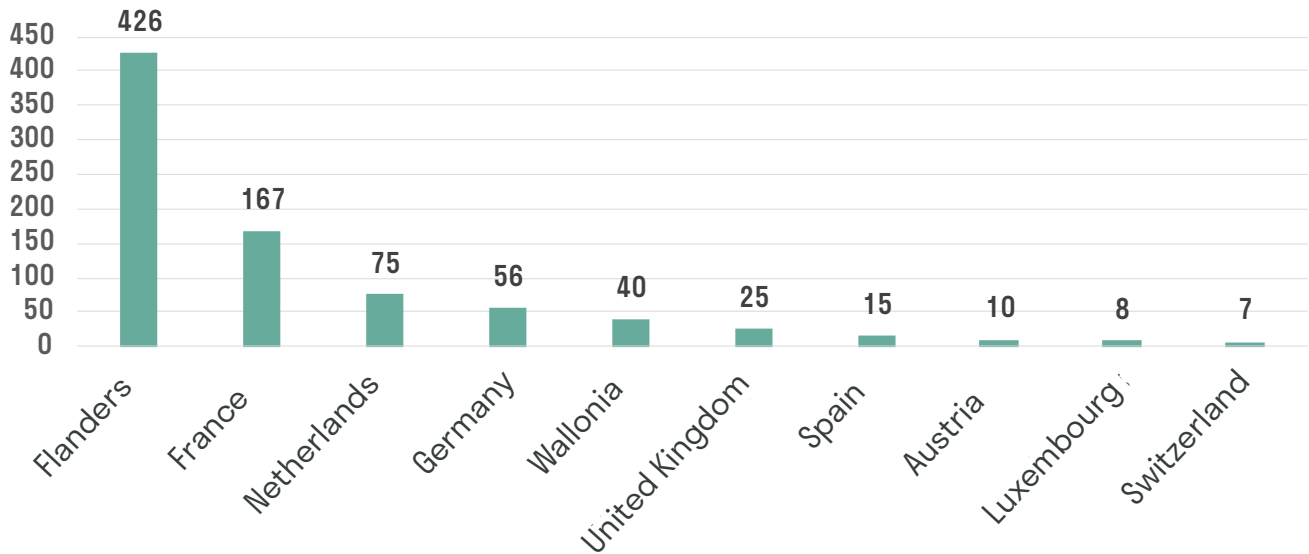


Chart 15 • Arteveldehogeschool Research – Top 10 (foreign) markets for 2023 based on unique performances per country per location (unique production x unique location x country)

INSERT: 'Cour des Belges' impact measurement on Chalon dans La Rue

Recent investments by the Government of Flanders gave Circuscentrum the opportunity to establish bilateral collaborations with neighbouring countries France and the UK. There was a collaboration with a number of French partners who were given the incentive to programme Flemish work. A collective of Belgian companies organised a focus in Chalon dans la Rue, and figures were gathered. A year after the 'Cour des Belges' at the Chalon dans la Rue festival, Circuscentrum conducted a survey of participating companies (6 Flemish and 6 Walloon) to assess the impact. Thanks to the collaboration of the 12 participating companies, the following results emerged:

- 200 shows: visibility at the festival led to 200 performances in 2023 or planned performances for 2024, distributed among Flemish and Walloon circus companies.
- 600 shows worldwide: these companies will perform a total of more than 600 performances in 2023 and 2024, across Belgium and 16 other countries, including France (313), Germany (70) and the United Kingdom (38).
- 171 performances through Cour des Belges: the 'Cour des Belges' resulted in 171 performances, mainly in France, but also in the UK, Spain, Switzerland and Belgium.
- €350,000 for Flemish companies: the total income through buyouts for the participating companies amounted to more than €500,000, of which almost €350,000 was for Flemish companies.

In addition to the distribution across different countries, there is also a striking variation in the extent to which Flemish circus companies are active abroad. Some companies play internationally only a few times a year, while others have a more intense presence on foreign stages. An overview of the companies with the largest number of performances abroad (Table 23) gives a picture of the performers who manage to have a strong international profile.



Table 4 • Top 10 Companies with most international performances

COMPANY
Zinzi & Evertjan
15FEET6
Grensgeval
Collectif Malunés
BE FLAT
Cie Pol & Freddy
Circumstances
Alexander Vantournhout / Not Standing
Compagnie Krak
Circus Katoen

A major factor in the high-playing frequency of companies such as Zinzi & Evertjan and 15Feet6 abroad is their strategic choice to perform during the winter season in pallazos, as they are known – dinner shows in Germany and Austria. In these shows, over several weeks, they may perform shorter acts often as many as five times a week. This 'wintering' in cabarets offers performers a chance to still achieve a consistent number of performances during a period with fewer outdoor circus festivals. It also acts as a stable source of income and offers experience on a different type of stage than the summer festivals.

Still, the international playing field is not natural or desirable for every Flemish circus company. While some companies focus their strategy specifically on international distribution, others consciously choose to perform only in Flanders or Belgium. This may be motivated by personal considerations, such as family obligations or a desire to reduce the ecological impact of travel. In the Arteveldehogeschool dataset, we see that 8 of the 50 companies surveyed were operating exclusively in Flanders in 2023, which corresponds to about 18% of the companies.

Because the research focuses exclusively on the year 2023, deeper analyses on trends and evolutions are not possible for now. Circuscentrum, however, wants to build on the findings of this study to take a broader view of the international scale of the Flemish circus sector in the future. The strategy behind and impact of international distribution is to be further explored here. Although some companies purposefully develop their foreign playing opportunities, international touring is also regularly the result of chance opportunities.

"There are ambitions to send the production out into the world, though. Now, sadly, it feels unrealistic. If someone comes looking who happens to have a festival somewhere, who thinks we'll fit in, we'll be there. It has to happen to you."¹³⁰

Especially for artists without an extensive international network or experience, finding suitable presentation venues remains a challenge. Knowledge of international circuits can help determine which performances can take off where and do well. A distribution office often plays a crucial role in this, as employees have a personal network and knowledge of specific contexts. This network increases the chances of a good match between production and stage and provides greater security when engaging in international projects.¹³¹

Another challenge in working internationally addressed in the Circus-Career Survey is the complexity of international regulations, such as differences in driving and resting times, emission zones, taxes and administrative requirements. In this regard, good oversight and legal support are essential for companies wishing to undertake international tours.¹³²

In addition, ecological sensibility plays an increasing role in performers' (international) career choices, especially given the distinctly international nature of the industry. While some performers maintain their international mobility, others consciously choose to limit it and emphasise their activities in Flanders and Brussels, or take advantage of sustainable travel options, such as train and car transport.

"One opportunity that can be further developed in that regard is to make visible the opportunities and ecosystem in Wallonia and in neighbouring countries."¹³³

International travel expenses

International touring is crucial for many circus companies, but it involves significant costs. Since the Second Circus Decree, circus companies have been able to call upon a separate subsidy line for 'International Travel Expenses'. With this subsidy line for international travel costs, Flanders is aiming to give Flemish circus performances the opportunity to participate in foreign audience-oriented initiatives and increase their financial viability.

Between 2021 and 2023, 16 circus companies were awarded subsidies on this line (see Description of the Circus Sector chapter – Table 12). These 16 circus companies received subsidies for a wide range of destinations. Although most subsidies were awarded for European destinations, there were some notable exceptions, such as performances in Saudi Arabia and the United States (Tables 24 and 25).



¹³⁰ Ibid., 63.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 7.



Table 5 • DCYM Data – Kiosk Fields: Overview of Subsidy Line for International Travel Costs: destination x company x year

CIRCUS COMPANY	2021	2022	2023
ADM		France	France
Amoukanama		Hungary	United Kingdom, United States
Be Flat		Switzerland, Letland	
Circumstances		Spain	France, Austria, Portugal, Czech Republic & Romania, United Kingdom
Circus Katoen		Croatia	United Kingdom
Collectif Malunés		France, Netherlands	Czech Republic, United Kingdom, Sweden, Switzerland
Common Ground			France
Compagnie Krak	Romania	Portugal	
D'Irque & Fien	Saudi Arabia		
Grensgeval			France
MOVEDBYMATTER		France, Lithuania, the Netherlands (twice), Switzerland	
Pol & Freddie	France	France	Austria
Sinking Sideways		Austria	France
Sur Measure			United Kingdom
THERE THERE Company		Germany, Lithuania	Austria
TNT Crew			Austria



Table 6 • Overview of Subsidy Line for International Travel Costs: allocated subsidy amount (€) x destination x company x year – Source: DCYM – Kiosk Fields

COUNTRY/COMPANY	2021	2022	2023	TOTAL
Germany		€ 848		€ 848
THERE THERE Company		€ 848		€ 848
France	€ 450	€ 37.583	€ 12.573	€ 50.606
ADM		€ 754	€ 2.890	€ 3.644
Circumstances			€ 1.712	€ 1.712
Collectif Malunés		€ 31.149		€ 31.149
Common Ground			€ 1.786	€ 1.786
Grensgeval			€ 3.557	€ 3.557
MOVEDBYMATTER		€ 4.130		€ 4.130
Pol & Freddie	€ 450	€ 1.550		€ 2.000
Sinking Sideways			€ 2.628	€ 2.628

Hungary		€ 3.500		€ 3.500
Amoukanama		€ 3.500		€ 3.500
Croatia		€ 2.160		€ 2.160
Circus Katoen		€ 2.160		€ 2.160
Latvia		€ 3.069		€ 3.069
Be Flat		€ 3.069		€ 3.069
Lithuania		€ 8.417		€ 8.417
MOVEDBYMATTER		€ 5.960		€ 5.960
THERE THERE Company		€ 2.457		€ 2.457
The Netherlands		€ 5.200		€ 5.200
Collectif Malunés		€ 2.600		€ 2.600
MOVEDBYMATTER		€ 2.600		€ 2.600
Austria		€ 1.100	€ 8.391	€ 9.491
Circumstances			€ 2.488	€ 2.488
Pol & Freddie			€ 853	€ 853
Sinking Sideways		€ 1.100		€ 1.100
THERE THERE Company			€ 3.200	€ 3.200
TNT Crew			€ 1.850	€ 1.850
Portugal		€ 1.876	€ 2.731	€ 4.607
Circumstances			€ 2.731	€ 2.731
Compagnie Krak		€ 1.876		€ 1.876
Saudi Arabia	€ 9.500			€ 9.500
D'Irque & Fien	€ 9.500			€ 9.500
Spain		€ 1.918		€ 1.918
Circumstances		€ 1.918		€ 1.918
Czech Republic			€ 10.322	€ 10.322
Collectif Malunés			€ 10.322	€ 10.322
Czech Republic & Romania			€ 4.325	€ 4.325
Circumstances			€ 4.325	€ 4.325
Sweden			€ 8.378	€ 8.378
Collectif Malunés			€ 8.378	€ 8.378
Switzerland		€ 3.519	€ 6.626	€ 10.145
Be Flat		€ 1.696		€ 1.696
Collectif Malunés			€ 6.626	€ 6.626
MOVEDBYMATTER		€ 1.823		€ 1.823
United Kingdom			€ 16.854	€ 16.854
Amoukanama			€ 1.946	€ 1.946
Circumstances			€ 3.066	€ 3.066
Circus Katoen			€ 2.062	€ 2.062
Collectif Malunés			€ 8.965	€ 8.965
Sur Mesure			€ 815	€ 815
United States			€ 8.000	€ 8.000
Amoukanama			€ 8.000	€ 8.000
TOTAL	€ 9.950	€ 69.190	€ 78.201	€ 157.341

The above tables again show that companies that have found their way to this subsidy line often use it multiple times. (For further analysis of this subsidy line, see Description of the Circus Sector chapter)

Table 26 shows that the subsidy line is used for a wide range of presentation venues. For most of these venues, only one subsidy has been received so far. Exceptions to this are Olala Festival (Austria), On The Edge Festival (Austria), Chalons Dans La Rue (France), Circa (France), Out There Festival (United Kingdom) and Helium Festival (Lithuania). Files under the 2022 and 2023 festivals in France and the UK were largely awarded under Focus France and Focus UK.



Table 7 • Overview of Subsidy Line for International Travel Costs: number of allocated subsidy files (€) x destination x company x year – Source: DCYM – Kiosk Fields

DESTINATION	2021	2022	2023	TOTAL
Saudi Arabia	1			1
Dhahran, King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (KAICIID)	1			1
Austria		1	4	5
Olala Festival - Lienz			3	3
On The Edge Festival - Vienna		1	1	2
Switzerland		2	1	3
Cirqu'Aarau - Aarau			1	1
Festival De la Cité - Lausanne		1		1
Le Castrum - Yverdon-les-Bains		1		1
Czech Republic			1	1
Letni Letna - Prague			1	1
Czech Republic & Romania			1	1
KoresponDance - Prague en FITS Festival - Sibiu			1	1
Germany		1		1
Festival ATOLL - Karlsruhe		1		1
Spain		1		1
FiraTàrrega - Tàrrega		1		1
France	1	4	5	10
Chalons Dans la Rue - Chalons-en-Champagne	1	2		3
Circa - Auch		1	3	4
Festival des 7 Collines - Saint-Etienne			1	1

Leu Tempo Festival - La Réunion		1		1
regio Occitanië + Circa - Auch			1	1
United Kingdom			5	5
GDIF - Londen en Freedom Festival - Hull			1	1
Out There Festival - Great-Yarmouth			2	2
Out There Festival - Great-Yarmouth en Crying Out Loud			1	1
4 festivals*			1	1
Croatia		1		1
CirkoBalkana + 2 other festivals*		1		1
Hungary		1		1
Sziget Festival - Budapest		1		1
Lithuania		2		2
Helium Festival - Vilnius		2		2
Latvia		1		1
Re Riga! Festival - Riga		1		1
The Netherlands		3		3
Circolo - Tilburg		1		1
Circusbende Festival - Amsterdam		1		1
Jonge Harten - Groningen		1		1
Portugal		1	1	2
Festival Sementes - Almada		1		1
LEME Festival - Ílhavo			1	1
Sweden			1	1
CirkusMania - Stockholm			1	1
United States			1	1
Pathways - New York			1	1
TOTAL	2	18	20	40

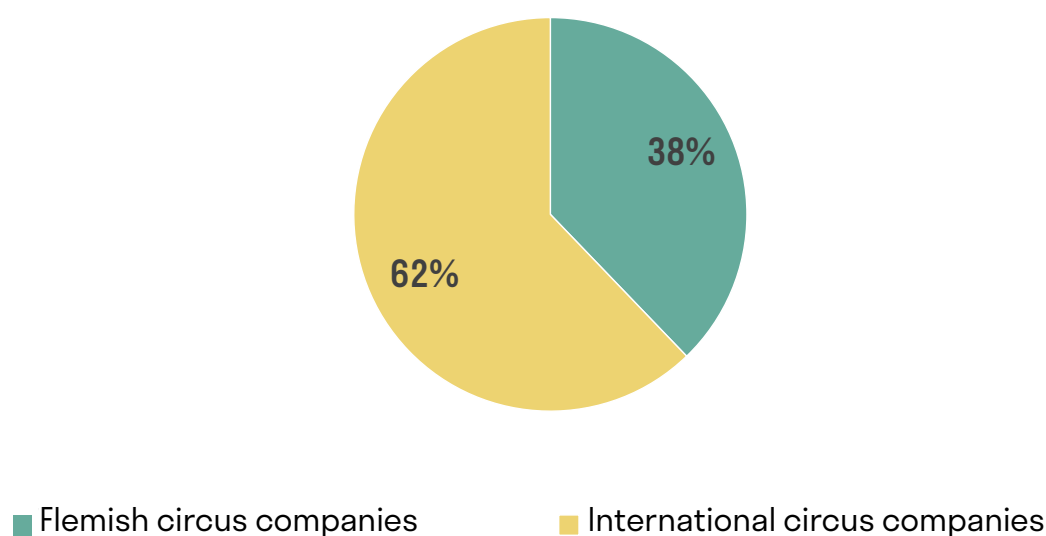
*not every festival received a separate entry in the dataset

INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMMING AT FLEMISH CIRCUS FESTIVALS

Not only Flemish circus artists and companies, but also Flemish circus festivals are strongly internationally oriented (see Description of the Circus Sector chapter). An analysis of the programmes for 20 Flemish festivals that programmed circus in 2023 shows that international companies played 62% of the number of circus performances (Chart 36).



PERFORMANCES AT FLEMISH CIRCUS FESTIVALS IN 2023 FLEMISH VS INTERNATIONAL CIRCUS COMPANIES



**Chart 16 • Circuscentrum Data – performances at Flemish circus festivals in 2023
– Flemish vs. International circus companies**

Since these figures are currently only available for one season, it is important to observe sufficient nuance. After all, the dynamics in programming can vary. Future analyses will provide greater insight into trends over multiple seasons, which is essential for an in-depth understanding of the evolution of circus programming in Flanders.

In addition, the ratio of Flemish versus international performances varies greatly by festival. In Table 27, we show the percentages for each festival:



Table 8 • Ratio of Flemish vs. international circus performances at circus festivals in Flanders in 2023

FESTIVAL	% FLEMISH CIRCUS PERFORMANCES ¹³⁴ IN 2023	% INTERNATIONAL CIRCUS PERFORMANCES IN 2023	TOTAL NUMBER OF CIRCUS PERFORMANCES IN 2023
Zomer Van Antwerpen*	0%	100%	34
Gevleugelde Stad	19%	81%	139
Brouwsels op Straat	22%	78%	50
De kleine stooringe	22%	78%	9
Sinjur Circo	25%	75%	12
De Grote Sierk	32%	68%	28
Plein de Cirque	32%	68%	28
CIRKL	36%	64%	44
Theater aan Twater	37%	63%	30
Cirque Plus	41%	59%	83

¹³⁴ The number of performances is the number of unique show moments (performances played multiple times at the same venue and/or day are therefore not de-duplicated)

StraPatZen	43%	57%	14
Cirk!Aalst	48%	52%	44
Miramiro Festival	50%	50%	62
MAD Festival	57%	43%	30
Visual Festival	60%	40%	5
Theater op de Markt	62%	38%	76
De Donderdagen	67%	33%	9
CIRKLABO Festival	81%	19%	16
Sierk Masjiek	100%	0%	5
Theater aan Zee*	100%	0%	12

*Zomer van Antwerpen and Theater aan Zee are not specific circus festivals, but do programme several circus performances annually and were therefore included in this analysis.

The programme for these (circus) festivals in Flanders in 2023 is extremely international, with circus companies from 25 different countries, ranging from France, Spain and Germany to Guatemala, Portugal, Sweden, Poland and Togo. This confirms Flanders' important role as a stage for international companies.

The strategy behind the international programming of these festivals requires further exploration. For example, several festivals aim to host (international) artists as part of a broader tour, with the goal of reducing travel and mileage. By grouping artists as part of a tour, festivals can not only reduce their carbon footprint, but also alleviate the logistical challenges of transporting international companies.

Yet it is crucial to understand these strategies in their full context. While the emphasis on international acts provides opportunities for cultural exchange, festivals must also consider the impact of their programming choices on the local circus community. Finding a balance between inviting international companies and supporting local performers is essential for the sustainable development of the Flemish circus sector.

In addition to programming international companies, more and more festivals are actively inviting international professionals. One way this is done is by organising pitch sessions, where local companies and performers have the opportunity to present their work to international programmers. These meetings are crucial for creating networking opportunities and may lead to new collaborations, tours and artistic exchanges.



CHALLENGES FOR THE INTERNATIONAL FLEMISH CIRCUS SECTOR

- The Flemish circus sector is strongly internationally oriented. While this internationalisation offers opportunities for cultural exchange and artistic enrichment, it also brings significant challenges. It is essential to find a balance between inviting international companies and supporting local talent. In addition, working with different languages and cultural backgrounds requires a **multilingual approach and sensitivity to diversity**.
- The **sustainability of working internationally** presents a complex challenge. While income from international activities is essential, compensation through buyouts and co-production fees is often disproportionate to the time performers spend travelling and working. Building up and maintaining an international network requires considerable time, space and resources, which can be especially problematic for emerging creators and companies that need visibility to launch their work on the international market. Moreover, after a long period abroad, it can be difficult to reconnect with the Flemish circus network. In addition, the irregular work schedule, often combined with high workloads and additional tasks, makes it challenging to balance (international) projects and personal life needs.

Suggestion for further research:

A broad-based study that identifies the various international strategies for the Flemish circus sector and examines the impact of working internationally can provide some valuable insights on the operational aspects and the cultural, economic and social implications for the sector.

- The Flemish circus sector is increasingly reliant upon Flemish subsidies for international activities. This support facilitates international operations and opens up new opportunities for Flemish performers, but targeting **international subsidy** opportunities remains a challenge. European programmes such as Creative Europe and Culture Moves Europe that provide external project funding are not yet widely known or used within the sector. It takes time and skills to become familiar with the application procedures and eligibility criteria. Although some youth circuses are already successfully using European funds, navigating the diversity of subsidy programmes remains a barrier for many organisations and professionals. This applies not only to circus performers, but also to e.g. circus creation space, which until now have made little use of these opportunities. By focusing on information and support, the sector can be encouraged to make better use of international funding.

- The **complexity of international law** is often a barrier when working and touring internationally. Rules around driving periods and periods of calm, emission zones, contracts and other legal obligations vary greatly from country to country, making it difficult to maintain an overview and conform correctly.
- Initiatives such as Focus UK and Focus France, aimed at building up connections with foreign circus sectors, are valuable for increasing the sales market and creating exchange opportunities. However, to maximise the impact of these collaborations, there is a need for a **sustainable approach**. This implies a focus not only on ad hoc projects, but also on developing long-term relationships and structural partnerships that strengthen the Flemish circus sector in the long term.

Suggestion for further research:

A study that explores the perception of the 'Flemish circus' – both nationally and internationally – can provide some valuable insights into exactly what this label means and how this reputation is shaped and perceived by different stakeholders.

- **Ecological footprint** awareness is an increasing challenge for working internationally within the circus sector. Companions make strategic choices to reduce their impact, such as planning logical tours and choosing sustainable transport options. Fortunately, more and more alternatives are emerging, such as digital and hybrid options for networking, conferences and meetings, which means that physical travel is not always necessary. It is crucial for the sector to embrace these developments to balance international mobility and ecological responsibility.

03 SAFETY

Within the circus world, where challenging boundaries, rewriting rules and shifting perspectives are central, safety is an essential theme. In creating an environment where circus practitioners, circus performers and their audiences can safely experience these challenges, it is important to be aware of the associated risks. The question that arises here is: how can we provide a safe environment, both for ourselves and for others?

"There is a growing awareness within the sector that safety and prevention are priority concerns. We strive to provide a safe environment that goes hand in hand with encouraging creativity, experimentation and self-development. For everyone involved in our organisations: staff, partners and practitioners. Both during work, training, creation and in play." Jan Peyls (Circuscentrum)¹³⁵

It is therefore very important to have regard to the various technical, physical and psychosocial aspects of safety. We define each of these themes separately, but their interdependence is crucial to an integrated safety policy.

- **Technical safety:** this includes the safety of installations, rigging, devices and the regular inspections of equipment as well as equipment knowledge.
- **Physical safety:** this covers first aid in the event of accidents, but also injury prevention, accident prevention and the general health of circus practitioners.
- **Psychosocial safety:** this includes dealing with and preventing transgressive behaviour, burn-out and promoting a healthy mental state.

In addition to these three main themes, financial and legal security – important for the overall protection (and professionalisation) of circus professionals and organisations also play a role (see Professionalisation chapter).

Why this theme?

Pushing boundaries and taking risks are inherent in circus, and safety is a non-negotiable standard in this regard. The risks are directly influenced by the variety of techniques, the collective nature in which performers work intensively together and the heavy physical strain caused by intensive training. Knowledge of safety protocols and proper performance of techniques are important in improving the balance between challenge, fun and safety without losing the uniqueness of circus.

The body is the most important tool for circus performers and therefore requires constant care and attention. Yet performers face several challenges, such as a lack of knowledge among technicians, the use of do-it-yourself solutions, high workloads, stress and the significant physical strain their work entails. In the Circus-Career Survey, 42.3% of performers said they regularly had to take physical and safety risks during their careers.

Even in the educational part of the circus sector, where classes are often taught to larger groups, safety is paramount and there is a need for a proper environment.

¹³⁵ Katrijn De Bleser, "Veiligheid is een attitude - Tijd voor meer expertise over veiligheid," *Circusmagazine*, no. 73 (December 2022): 34–38.

This includes clear policies around accidents, trained instructors, and the use of safe and inspected equipment. Moreover, it is essential that instructors have the proper knowledge for using this equipment correctly.

In 2019, Circuscentrum, Circus Planet and El Circo D'ell Fuego launched a multi-year safety process to meet the need for an integrated safety policy.¹³⁶ This process, which during an initial phase included the eight structurally subsidised youth circuses (see Description of the circus sector chapter), aimed to increase competencies around and awareness of safety within the sector. In 2023, following this educational safety process, a similar safety process focused on the artistic component of the circus sector began. (see insert: Safety Process) Under both processes, several actions have been taken in recent years to create a safe learning environment and ensure the wellbeing of participants and teachers. For example, almost all the participating organisations now have an Internal Prevention Advisor (IPA).

"Being a prevention advisor at a youth circus is not that easy. There are a great many situations in the circus sector that are not described in existing safety regulations. For example, there are rules for working at height, other rules for flying and still others for falling materials. But in the circus world, those materials are often people; we are also just seeking height, even without attaching ourselves to something. There are no existing rules on how to do all that safely. So we have to look for other ways in which that can be done safely within the context of circus. For example: first learn how to fall properly on a drop mat before going up into the heights. But also: dealing with stress at height. Awareness of all the factors is important, and as a prevention advisor, I have to pass that awareness on to the instructors, assistants and participants."¹³⁷ Kris Hoeylaerts (Locorotondo)

Insert: Safety process

In 2020, Circuscentrum, in collaboration with El Circo D'ell Fuego and Circusplaneet, launched an important safety project aimed at the educational part of the circus sector. This initiative involved the eight structurally subsidised youth circuses in Flanders. Together, they filed with VIVO to obtain funding for this process.

Objective and content:

The process aimed to enhance knowledge and awareness around safety within the circus education sector, with a focus on the wellbeing of both participants and staff. The project provided for the development of guidelines and procedures specific to the risks inherent in circus activities. The ultimate goal was to support circus organisations in the development of a safety policy with an view to controlling risks and effective prevention policies.

In addition, the project examined the necessary legal and other frameworks for developing an integrated safety policy that ensures a safe environment for a wide range of stakeholders.

¹³⁶ The safety process came about with VIVO funds. The social partners from the social-profit sector established VIVO as an umbrella initiative around training and employment. <https://www.vivosocialprofit.org/>

¹³⁷ De Bleser, "Veiligheid is een attitude - Tijd voor meer expertise over veiligheid."

Concrete actions and results:

The prevention organisation Plan A conducted an in-depth risk analysis at the start of the educational safety process. The goal was to formulate a common mission: to prevent unacceptable accidents. Plan A focused on three pillars of safety: technical safety, organisational safety, and teacher and participant behaviour. The analysis showed that all youth circuses are working to professionalise their safety policies, but that there are significant differences in approach, extent, and regulations. Advice was given, including the need for an overarching framework, centralised actions, and increasing risk awareness within organisations.

In addition to the analysis from Plan A, an inspection of the infrastructure for all eight participating youth circuses was given in collaboration with recognised inspection bodies (e.g. ACA, Vincotte, etc.).

The process included several actions. For example, the initiators organised periodic specialisation trainings with experts from the circus and other sectors and informed circus professionals about existing relevant training, such as the Basic Confidential Advisor Training from the Social Fund for Performing Arts and Internal Prevention Advisor Level 3. Teachers and participants in these modules subsequently formed expert groups (by subdomain and overarching) that monitored the process, served as a sounding board and provided a quick link between theory and practice.

One of the (many) results of this process is a safety charter, signed by all eight participating youth circuses. It is a statement of commitment and summarises the targets and broad lines of operation around safety. The charter is a living document, adaptable to the changing expertise in, and requirements of, the sector. Once a year, a collegial group composed of the various partners meets to review the charter and make adjustments as needed. You can find the most recent version on the [Circuscentrum website](#).

In the spring of 2024, two years after the launch of the educational safety process, Circuscentrum conducted an impact measurement for the eight participating youth circuses. It shows that 75% of those youth circuses have a general written safety policy, compared to 25% at the start of the process. More than half of the youth circuses now have a written specific policy regarding technical, physical and psychosocial safety. Although most youth circuses had various 'safety roles' in their organisations prior to the start of the process, there has been a notable increase in the number of internal prevention officers and company first responders. Furthermore, there is also a notable shift towards safety profiles with relevant training (previously, people who did not necessarily have training for this took on these roles). We discuss the further results from the impact measurement in the subtopics that follow.

Sustainability and future plans:

The process had a dual purpose: to strengthen competency development around safety and prevention within the circus education sector and to provide inspiration to the broader circus sector. In addition to increasing safety, attention was also paid to the sustainability of the results achieved. Plans were drawn up for further monitoring, including the development of in-service training with basic modules focusing on specific aspects of a prevention policy, such as first aid, rigging, and API (Integrity Contact Point) training. The repetition of training for prevention advisors and the broadening of the process to the artistic sector were also included. A second process began in 2023, with a focus on the artistic component of the circus sector.

The processes led to the creation of five expert groups: Internal Prevention Advisor (IPA), Riggers, First Aid for Circus Accidents, Confidential Advisors and Integrity Contact Point (API). In addition, there is an annual Safe meeting for all interested parties. The processes also resulted in new (annual) training, such as the First Aid for Circus Accidents course in collaboration with the Flemish Cross and a training course in circus rigging in collaboration with the Social Fund for Performing Arts. This initial training provides participants with a certificate as a company emergency worker recognised by FPS ELSD, at least if they attend annual retraining. Within both processes, eight training courses were offered on technical, physical and psychosocial safety, with 68 participants already in the past two years.

These initiatives have already led to greater collaboration and knowledge exchange within the Flemish circus sector on safety, and are a great basis for doing so even more in the future. In 2024, avenues for establishing a sectoral external prevention service will be explored with Idewe.

At the international level, there is also a focus on safety in the circus sector, knowledge exchange and an expansion of training offerings. In April 2024, Circuscentrum, in collaboration with MAD Festival and El Circo D'ell Fuego, organised an international exchange around all aspects of safety, during the conference "Circus a safe(r) space for danger". This provided a great deal of new input and interesting practices that can further fuel awareness and a framework around safety. At www.circus-a-safer-space-for-danger.be, these findings will be shared extensively with the 146 conference participants and other interested parties at home and abroad.

TECHNICAL SAFETY

Technical safety is crucial within the circus sector. It is specifically about the equipment and rigging used during performances and training. Circus performers literally entrust their lives to this equipment, highlighting the importance of a thorough and detailed safety framework around technical safety.

Equipment and rigging

In the circus sector, rigging refers to the process of setting up, securing and maintaining the equipment and structures needed for certain disciplines (e.g. aerial acrobatics), tents and other technical installations. This includes installing ropes, cables, harnesses, trusses, pulleys and other mechanical systems that enable performers to perform safely and in a controlled manner in the air or at high altitudes. A circus rigger must understand technical set-ups and set them up and down safely. This means translating the needs of teachers and performers into safe, workable and affordable solutions, while accurately calculating the loads for the components used.

It is essential to select the right equipment and check that it meets the required load, according to strict safety standards. This includes not only the purchase of high-quality equipment, but also the regular inspection and proper handling of this equipment. The construction, dismantling and maintenance of installations require in-depth knowledge. Travelling with mobile equipment presents specific safety challenges, for example, around the use of pickets and anchors. In the circus sector, professionals often use equipment (such as climbing equipment) that originally served a different purpose. As a result, they frequently apply DIY solutions, which can pose significant risks if there is insufficient knowledge about the proper installation of and load for the equipment.

In addition, circus activities take place in various spaces (see Space and Infrastructure chapter), each with specific technical options and needs. This variety of venues requires a circus rigger to understand not only the specific characteristics of the equipment used, but also the unique conditions for each space. This underscores the need for custom rigging to ensure safety and functionality, regardless of the setting in which circus presents itself.

However, there is a lack of formal training that focuses on technical safety and rigging within the circus sector. Existing (stage) technical courses often do not have regard to circus-related aspects. This lack of circus-specific technical training has led to a situation where only a few experts possess the circus-specific knowledge. Similarly, there is a severe lack of circus-specific knowledge among technicians at culture houses and other organisations that house circus performances (we discuss this in more detail in the Space & Infrastructure chapter).

To fill this gap, several initiatives have emerged recently to improve training and knowledge sharing within the sector.

As part of the safety process (see safety process insert), Circuscentrum, in collaboration with the Social Fund for Performing Arts and Circus Marcel, is organising a specific 'Circus Rigging and Equipment Knowledge' training course in 2024, as in 2022.¹³⁸ This training is open to circus performers, as well as technicians who want to safely welcome circus performances – whether in a tent, black box, open air or public space – at their festival, event, cultural centre, arts centre, community centres, etc. Employees, students, trainees and learners within organisations from PC 304 can take advantage of an annual sectoral training credit and can therefore participate in this training for free.

According to the impact measurement conducted by Circuscentrum as part of the educational safety process (see Safety Process insert), half of the participating youth circuses in 2024 have a written policy on technical safety. Prior to the process, this was the case at only one youth circus. In addition, seven of the eight participating youth circuses had a rigger in 2024. Before the process, this was a trained rigger at five of the organisations; today, all seven riggers are trained. In the area of material testing, a larger shift can be observed. Before the safety process, two of the eight youth circuses had their equipment inspected annually; in 2024, seven of the eight youth circuses will do so. (Tables 30, 31 and 32)



Table 9 • Circuscentrum Impact Measurement – Educational Safety Process – written out safety policy

	BEFORE THE SAFETY PROCESS	2024
Organisations with written policies around Technical Safety	1/8 (13%)	4/8 (50%)



Table 10 • Circuscentrum Impact Measurement – Educational Safety Process – riggers

	BEFORE THE SAFETY PROCESS			2024		
	No	Yes, without training	Yes, with training	No	Yes, without training	Yes, with training
Organisations with a rigger	1/8 (13%)	2/8 (25%)	5/8 (63%)	1/8 (13%)	0/8 (0%)	7/8 (88%)



Table 11 • Circuscentrum Impact Measurement – Educational Safety Process – equipment inspection

	BEFORE THE SAFETY PROCESS	2024
Organisations that have their equipment inspected annually	2/8 (25%)	7/8 (88%)

¹³⁸ "Circusrigging en materiaalkennis," *podiumkunsten.be*, n.d.

This impact measurement focuses on the eight structurally subsidised youth circuses, all of which participated in the first safety process. The process is the basis for positive changes that will also take place in the artistic part of the sector and at other, non-subsidised youth circuses. The second safety process, along with annual training sessions, expert groups and the annual SAFE meeting – where knowledge is shared and disseminated – aim to further encourage these developments (see Safety Process insert).

Some subsidised youth circuses, meanwhile, invite non-subsidised youth circuses and individual performers to have their equipment inspected on the same inspection day. This initiative is still in its infancy and has some practical challenges, but offers some promising opportunities for enhancing knowledge sharing and collaboration in the sector.

There is also increasing regard for technical safety at the international level. In particular, FEDEC, the umbrella organisation for circus colleges, has put a lot of effort into this in recent years. In 2022, the RIGGERS (React, Invent, Get together for a Goal: Expertise in Rigging Services) Project was initiated with the goal of launching an international rigging community.¹³⁹ During the RIGGERS project, the focus was on sharing knowledge and good practices, which led to 'the FED talks' – a series of video tutorials on rigging. The project involved 10 partners: FEDEC and 9 circus schools from 8 different countries. The final meeting of the RIGGERS project took place in Antwerp (April 2024) during the international conference 'Circus a Safe(r) Space for Danger'.

The rigger is one of the most responsible positions in the circus sector. Riggers bear the burden of ensuring the safety of performers and audiences; the pressure involved is enormous. The psychological impact of this responsibility is often underestimated and is rarely addressed in existing safety protocols. FEDEC, as part of the above RIGGERS project, along with Stockholm University of the Arts (SKH) conducted a study on the profession of rigging within circus colleges.¹⁴⁰ The results of this study describe, among other things, the high stress and workload experienced by riggers: "You never hear about the riggers, the safety matters unless something happens, if there are accidents or mistakes or injuries. This psychological part of the job is of huge importance and not part of the questionnaire at all. Who takes care of the rigger if something goes wrong... what is the safety net for a rigger?"¹⁴¹ FEDEC's research highlights the risks and vulnerabilities experienced by riggers, and the need to create a safety net for these professionals.

The study also emphasises the importance of knowledge sharing. When asked who they could turn to for advice, a large number of riggers indicated that they seek advice outside the school. For example, 50% consult other riggers within the performing arts, while 24% turn to direct colleagues or specialist teachers.

¹³⁹ "Riggers," FEDEC, n.d.

¹⁴⁰ "Riggers Survey Report" (2022).

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁴² Ibid., 12.

PHYSICAL SAFETY

In the world of circus, the performer's body is not only an instrument, but also the capital. The risks of injury and the limited durability of circus performers' bodies make them, especially acrobats, vulnerable in their careers. The risks for circus performers are similar to those of elite athletes, but the intense and frequent repetition of performances increases the risk of microtrauma and, consequently, serious injury.¹⁴³ Ensuring physical safety is therefore critical. Physical safety includes injury prevention, First Aid for Circus Accidents, and promoting safe and healthy work habits such as correct stretching, warm-ups, and teaching movements correctly. The knowledge needed around this is not yet present in everyone to the same degree. Not all performers and teachers can enjoy the same opportunities for training and continuing education, partly because of the influx from other sectors and the large proportion of self-taught performers in the circus sector. In addition, it is essential to develop and maintain a culture of safe attitudes, so that performers can practise their craft in a sustainable manner.

The Circus-Career Survey highlights the ongoing focus on physical safety among circus performers, both during training, creation processes and performances. 42.3% of performers report that they have often had to take physical and safety risks in their careers. The physical strain of the profession of circus performers is considerable. Many performers worry about how to keep doing their jobs as they age. This involves risks of injury, which have not only physical but also mental consequences, such as stress and insecurity (see Psychosocial Safety).

"The work is very physical, super-technical – once you pass 40, I wonder: can I still do it?"¹⁴⁴

An injury can have drastic consequences, not only for the performer themselves, but also for the team and the audience.

"It's very difficult: because if I don't come, then my colleagues can't work, and the audience can't come."¹⁴⁵

Due to the high physical strain and limited durability of the body, circus performers – especially acrobats – are vulnerable in their careers. Unfortunately, the protection against these risks – due to the lack of a clear status (see Professionalisation chapter) – is often too low. Ensuring physical safety and establishing a support structure is therefore essential to making circus performers' careers more sustainable.

Internationally, much attention is paid to the physical safety of circus performers. At Codarts Rotterdam, the research group PEARL has been monitoring the physical and mental wellbeing of performing arts students in the Netherlands for ten years, with the goal of identifying health complaints and injuries, developing prevention strategies and preventing drop-out. Studying injuries in circuses proves more difficult than in dance, for example, mainly owing to the great diversity of disciplines. For example, in aerial acrobatics, the shoulders are the most common injury site, while in ground acrobatics, the lower back, wrists or ankles are more often the weak areas.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Marion Cossin, "Quand cirque rime avec risque" (March 13, 2019).

¹⁴⁴ Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 76.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Nick Verginis, "Trauma-Informed, Injuries Monitored. Beyond Safety and Risk with New Paradigms," *Circus a Safer Space for Danger*, 2024.

Until recently, however, the population of circus performers at PEARL was too small for proper risk factor analysis. At the international safety conference 'Circus a safe(r) space for danger' (2024), the researchers presented their first circus-specific results, linking plant versus animal protein intake to muscle injury. This revealed a possible correlation: students who get their protein primarily from plant sources seem to be more likely to have muscle injuries.¹⁴⁷ Although this is only the early stage of circus-specific research, it offers some promising opportunities for further knowledge development in the future.

In the circus education sector, greater knowledge around physical safety is important given the variety of participants: children, young people and adults of various ages, backgrounds and experience levels. Here, the principle of 'what's learnt in the cradle lasts till the tomb' applies, where it is very important that safe and healthy habits are taught from an early age. This not only lays the foundation for safe participation in circus activities, but also contributes to body awareness and the long-term sustainability of their physical health. Teaching techniques correctly and safely, with a focus on injury prevention, allows young circus practitioners to advance to professional careers with less risk of injury and better physical durability.

Several experts from the circus sector developed, within the youth circuses process and along with the Flemish Cross, a first aid training course for teachers.

"I noticed that ordinary first aid is not always applicable within a circus operation. For example, I was once asked by a performer to completely tape up a burn injury sustained on a Chinese mast so that the performer could train on the mast again. That doesn't fit at all with what I was learning. Experience tells us that we can respond to such a question, provided that the wound is properly cared for after training. That's just one example of how we went from first aid to First Aid for Circus Accidents."¹⁴⁸ Inne Verheyen (ECDF)

The First Aid for Circus Accidents training leads to a certificate as a company emergency worker, recognised by FPS ELSD subject to annual repetition. Participants and teachers of the course form a collegial group in which they search together for standards applicable at all youth circuses (and by circus performers). Teachers, trainers and performers often teach at different youth circuses. Thus, to avoid confusion, it is important to create a supported overarching safety policy. The physical safety colleague group discusses and decides on discussion points. For example, within the circus sector (and beyond), the use of an ice pack after a fall is currently a topic of discussion.

According to the impact measurement conducted by Circuscentrum as part of the educational safety process (see Safety Process insert), more than half (5) of the participating youth circuses in 2024 (8) have a written policy on physical safety. Before the safety process, this number was lower (3). In the area of physical safety profiles, we see an increase in the number of (trained) company first responders (before the process 3, in 2024, 7), as well as in the number of trained First Aid for Circus Accidents managers. There is also a notable evolution in terms of accidents: although most youth circuses already had an accident log before the safety process, by 2024, more than half of youth circuses are also keeping records of 'near accidents'. (Tables 33, 34 and 35)

¹⁴⁷ Janine Stubbe, "Monitoring the Health and Wellbeing of Codarts Circus Students," *Circus a Safer Space for Danger*, April 2024.

¹⁴⁸ De Bleser, "Veiligheid is een attitude - Tijd voor meer expertise over veiligheid."

**Table 12 • Circuscentrum Impact Measurement – Educational Safety Process – written out safety policy**

	BEFORE THE SAFETY PROCESS	2024
Organisations with written policies around Physical Safety	3/8 (38%)	5/8 (63%)

**Table 13 • Circuscentrum Impact Measurement – Educational Safety Process – First Aid for Circus Accidents Managers and Company Emergency Workers**

	BEFORE THE SAFETY PROCESS			2024		
	No	Yes, without training	Yes, without training	No	Yes, without training	Yes, without training
Organisations with a First Aid for Circus Accidents Manager	1/8 (13%)	2/8 (25%)	5/8 (63%)	1/8 (13%)	0/8 (0%)	7/8 (88%)
Organisations with a Company Emergency Worker	5/8 (63%)	0/8 (0%)	3/8 (38%)	1/8 (13%)	0/8 (0%)	7/8 (88%)

**Table 14 • Circuscentrum Impact Measurement – Educational Safety Process – Accident Log**

	BEFORE THE SAFETY PROCESS	2024
Organisations with an Accident Log	6/8 (75%)	7/8 (88%)
Organisations recording 'Near Accidents'	3/8 (38%)	5/8 (63%)

As mentioned earlier, this impact measurement was aimed at the eight structurally subsidised youth circuses that participated in the first safety process. Here too, we see some positive evolutions that will continue to develop in the coming years, including in other parts of the sector.

PSYCHOSOCIAL SAFETY

In addition to physical strain, many individuals in the circus sector experience significant mental strain. In the Circus-Career Survey, 45.8% of performers surveyed reported experiencing a lot of emotional strain in their careers; 44.2% reported difficulty in maintaining a good work-life balance. The dedication and passion of circus performers often come at the expense of self-care. This emotional strain is not limited to performers; riggers, as demonstrated in the FEDEC Riggers Survey, also experience high stress and workload owing to their position of responsibility. (see Technical Safety)

Regard for psychosocial safety has increased in recent years, thanks in part to broader societal developments such as the #MeToo movement, and the growing focus on transgressive behaviour and mental wellbeing. In the international circus sector, the collective 'Balance Ton Cirque' played a crucial role as a catalyst for change. This collective, founded to act against physical and psychological violence, received more than a hundred testimonies regarding seven different circus schools.

An important recent development in the field of psychosocial safety is the introduction of Integrity Contact Points (APIs) in youth work, an obligation since 2023. Youth circuses have followed suit and appointed their own APIs, who play a vital role in ensuring a safe environment for both children and adults.

The Decree by the Government of Flanders of 9 February 2024, implementing the Youth Decree of 23 November 2023, defines several tasks for the API¹⁴⁹:

- the API acts as a **first responder** to breaches of integrity;
- the API **records** the number and nature of reports and determinations;
- the API **refers** affected people to information, psychosocial support, medical assistance, legal assistance and police services as needed;
- the API **advises** the association on integrity policies;
- the API **supports** the association and its local divisions on implementing and optimising integrity policies and procedures.

Victims of harassment, sexual harassment and violence have been able to contact the Flemish Reporting Point for Transgressive Behaviour since September 2023.¹⁵⁰ This new reporting point provides support to organisations, including circus organisations, in addressing harassment and violence. In addition, the appointment of confidants within circus organisations is also very important. These individuals provide an approachable point of contact for staff and performers who encounter transgressive behaviour.

Within the educational safety programme (see insert Safety Process), Circuscentrum ran a psychosocial safety module in collaboration with El Circo D'ell Fuego in 2024. This module consisted of four training days provided by various external partners: Free up and Play, Expertise division and Tumult, Sensoa, and Pimento. The focus was on creating a safe working environment in youth circuses.

¹⁴⁹ "Integriteit in de Jeugdsector", Department of Culture, Youth & Media, n.d.

¹⁵⁰ "Overzicht," Vlaams Meldpunt Grensoverschrijdend Gedrag, n.d.

"Thinking about how we can feel safe as human beings at work or in a class. Psychosocial safety, though easily forgotten, is just as important as other forms of safety."¹⁵¹ Mieke Gielen (ECDF)

The APIs of the participating circus schools received training during the module with tools such as Sensoa's flagging system to assess and discuss transgressive behaviour. Emphasis was also placed on incorporating these tools into policy and on clear communication, so that everyone is aware of who the APIs are and how to get in touch with them.

According to impact measurement conducted by Circuscentrum as part of the educational safety pathway (see insert Safety Process), over half (5) of the participating circus schools (8) had a written policy on psychosocial safety by 2024, representing progress compared to before the Safety Process. With respect to psychosocial safety profiles, the significant change is the increase in people with (relevant) training. (Table 36 and 37)



Table 15 • Circuscentrum Impact Measurement – Educational Safety Process – written out safety policy

	BEFORE THE SAFETY PROCESS	2024
Organisations with written policies around Psychosocial Safety	3/8 (38%)	5/8 (63%)



Table 16 • Circuscentrum Impact Measurement – Educational Safety Process – Confidential Advisors and APIs

	BEFORE THE SAFETY PROCESS			2024		
	No	Yes, without training	Yes, without training	No	Yes, without training	Yes, without training
Organisations with a Confidential Advisor	2/8 (25%)	4/8 (50%)	2/8 (25%)	2/8 (25%)	2/8 (25%)	4/8 (50%)
Organisations with an Integrity Contact Point (API).	1/8 (13%)	4/8 (50%)	3/8 (38%)	1/8 (13%)	2/8 (25%)	5/8 (63%)

The impact measurement, once again, indicates positive evolutions among the eight structurally subsidised circus schools. During the Safety Focus Group, there was a clear emphasis on psychosocial safety, including in other parts of the circus sector. There appeared to be a high level of interest in further development in this area in the coming years, and a significant requirement for practical tips and guidelines.

Furthermore, in addition to working with APIs and confidants, burnout prevention is essential for promoting psychosocial safety. Circus performers are vulnerable to burnout due to the profession's high workload, irregular working hours, and intense physical and mental demands.

¹⁵¹ De Bleser, "Veiligheid is een attitude - Tijd voor meer expertise over veiligheid."

Circus performers often find that the line between work and home is blurred. The combination of long workdays, irregular hours, and a strong work identification makes it difficult to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

"Being a circus performer is a lifestyle."¹⁵²

This problem is exacerbated by limited financial security and the challenges of combining a circus career with family life. As artists move into new life phases, for instance, starting a family, it becomes ever more difficult to maintain a good balance. Childcare, especially that which accommodates the irregular working hours of circus performers, poses a major challenge.

"Becoming a mother really did have a serious impact on me as a person and as a circus performer. I took a step back as an independent artist."¹⁵³

FEDEC's ["Speak Out"](#) initiative is important internationally, playing a key role in promoting a safe working environment within the circus sector. This initiative aims to foster open communication among circus professionals about their experiences with psychosocial problems, transgressive behaviour, and other types of emotional strain. By making these issues discussable, FEDEC is helping to strengthen a culture of safety and support in the sector. The study "We Protect Animals Well" by Rosa Matthis, conducted with support from FEDEC, is also important in this regard (see insert "We Treat Animals Well").

INSERT: "We Treat Animals Well"

With the help and cooperation of FEDEC, Rosa Matthis conducted a survey in 2020 of all European professional circus schools concerning their experiences with transgressive behaviour, the causes of such behaviour, and how circus organisations react to it.¹⁵⁴ Her research, titled "We Protect Animals Well", is a cynical jibe at the observation that animals are treated better than (female) performers in the circus.

The survey was conducted completely anonymously. Following the survey, respondents were offered the opportunity to speak with Matthis, if they so desired. The data from those interviews was also used anonymously.

Matthis aims primarily to investigate abuse in circus schools and identify how principals are aware of this abuse, take appropriate steps, and develop preventive measures.

Matthis poses three research questions:

1. Is transgressive behaviour currently a problem within circus schools?
2. What mindset enables abuse in circus schools?
3. What measures/tools might be useful to address abuse?

¹⁵² Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek."

¹⁵³ Ibid., 75.

¹⁵⁴ Rosa Matthis, "We Protect Animals Well: A Structural Approach to Abusive Conduct within Circus Schools" (Master's Thesis, Linköping University, 2021).

The answer to the **first research question** is unequivocally clear. "All participating schools in the survey recognise that transgressive behaviour is a persistent issue that needs to be addressed continuously."

Concerning the **second research question**, Matthis indicates that circus, as with sports, deals with both ingrained traditions and the pressures of performance. She contends that, in a shifting cultural context, the circus sector requires improved practices in dealing with what is considered sensitive, offensive, and transgressive. One must be willing to allow change without fearing the authenticity of circus disciplines.

Her answer to the **third question** leaves no room for doubt: even if schools make efforts to develop the necessary procedures and adhere to agreements, there is still too much ignorance regarding structural discrimination at all levels. Circus schools need to make much more use of knowledge from other sectors. In addition, efforts towards inclusion are crucial to ensure staff and students reflect the contemporary diversity within society. Matthis concludes that a lack of representation of diverse groups increases the likelihood of transgressive behaviour.

SOURCE: Circusmagazine #69

Audience safety during performances, as well as the psychosocial safety of circus professionals, is of paramount importance. The Safety Focus Group highlighted that organisers, programmers, and artists are frequently underprepared for incidents during a performance. Clear emergency plans are essential for circus organisers, and all personnel involved should be thoroughly trained in emergency response. Proper communication of safety procedures to the public helps to avert panic. Adequate aftercare measures must also be available for visitors affected by an incident. Consistent review and testing of safety protocols maintain their effectiveness, foster a safe environment, and allow for swift action should incidents occur.

OTHER ASPECTS OF SAFETY

Safety within the circus sector encompasses several areas that are closely related to health and wellbeing legislation. Whilst technical, physical, and psychosocial safety are paramount, other aspects are also important for the wellbeing of circus performers and organisations. These three domains were created based on the specific needs of the sector and apply general health and wellbeing guidelines within the circus-specific context. Nevertheless, it's crucial to recognise that health and wellbeing legislation encompasses several relevant domains, which are important for the further professionalisation of the circus world. Issues such as bullying, ergonomics, and exposure to harmful environmental factors (like noise and air quality) are often already included in safety protocols in larger organisations. In the circus world, though, these aspects are often less apparent, but they are important additions to current safety measures. As the sector develops its professional standards, it is crucial to integrate these broader health and wellbeing aspects as well.

AWARENESS RAISING AND SAFETY CULTURE

Safety promotion and implementation are both essential for fostering safety. There was consensus within the Safety Focus Group that raising awareness and teaching a safety mindset should be a priority, rather than enforcing rigid rules. Strict rules can, at times, be counterproductive and cause resistance. We should strive to present safety as a logical and attractive choice, so that it becomes an ingrained part of daily practice within the circus sector.

Circus organisations have a legal duty to comply with various safety obligations. Comprehending and accurately applying these laws demands considerable time and effort, especially considering the sector's international scope. Safety standards and laws vary from country to country. Even though there are legal obligations, this does not always guarantee effective safety policies that are implemented and backed by all employees. The Safety Focus Group also pointed out that there is a considerable discrepancy between theoretical safety and practical safety. Satisfying administrative inspection requirements does not automatically equate to guaranteed actual safety. There's a difference between having the correct paperwork and actually understanding and implementing safe practices.

To foster a safety culture, it's essential that everyone involved – from performers to support staff – feel responsible for their own safety and the safety of others. Presenting safety not solely as an obligation, but as an integral component of the professional identity of circus performers and employees, allows the sector to make headway in ensuring a safe (work) environment.

CHALLENGES FOR A SAFE(R) CIRCUS SECTOR

- Circus performers' careers are both **physically and mentally demanding**, posing significant challenges to their **resilience**. The physical demands, particularly on acrobats, raise the risk of injury and can compromise the longevity of their careers. Circus professionals, both performers and technicians, also endure high mental strain due to irregular hours and constant performance pressure, which raises the risk of burnout. This calls for targeted measures to support the physical and mental health of circus professionals, both in terms of injury prevention and promoting a better work-life balance. Initiatives, such as the annual First Aid for Circus Accidents Manager course run in partnership with the Flemish Cross, assist in enhancing expertise and a safety culture within the sector.
- **Transgressive behaviour** is still a significant concern within the circus sector, as the physical nature of the art form, the emotional engagement of performers, and power relationships can sometimes give rise to problematic situations. Effective psychosocial safety protocols and guidelines, alongside practical and deployable tips and charters, are essential for promoting a safe and respectful work environment. The creation of Integrity Contact Points (APIs) and reporting avenues for transgressive behaviour offers a significant opportunity to reinforce the safety culture within the sector, by making reports accessible and providing appropriate support for all participants.
- Currently, **circus-specific knowledge** and expertise are lacking, particularly in the domain of technical safety, such as rigging. **Sharing knowledge** about materials, facilities and safe use of equipment is essential for a safe work environment, but now often happens informally and in closed circuits. Therefore, valuable information is not consistently accessible to all those who would benefit from it. Moreover, the level of knowledge is variable because of the influx of self-learners and professionals from other fields. Initiatives, including joint training days or an open knowledge base, coupled with safety courses and expert groups, can help establish a shared foundation and comprehensive safety culture within the sector.
- **Complex and diverse (inter)national safety regulations** create a substantial challenge for the circus sector. Meeting the requirements of this legislation demands not just a detailed knowledge of various rules, but also continual adaptation to regional differences and the particular nature of circus techniques. Additionally, legal requirements don't always translate into robust and adequately supported safety policies. However, this heightened focus on safety has resulted in a greater number of initiatives, both in Flanders and abroad, which centre on circus-specific knowledge, offering opportunities for advancement and development within the sector and at the policy level.
- A **comprehensive safety policy**, endorsed by all circus organisations, is essential. The diversity of the sector requires a layered approach that includes both amateur and professional levels. Establishing a common safety mindset within the sector demands continuous efforts from everyone involved.

A **wide-reaching awareness** campaign is essential here, targeting not only circus professionals, but also the public and other stakeholders. Circus schools are well placed to lead the way by incorporating safety awareness and practices from the very beginning of training. This can foster a culture where safety is ingrained.

Suggestion for further research:

This chapter has frequently referenced the impact of the educational safety process. A more comprehensive survey within the sector in the future could yield further valuable insights into the diverse safety strategies and cultures that exist and their evolution.



The circus sector in Flanders has evolved greatly over the past 15 years. To gain a clearer understanding of the sector's current position and the challenges and opportunities it faces, we carried out a SWO-ART analysis. This method, developed by Socius, combines the well-known SWOT analysis with the forward-looking SOAR method. This creates a framework that helps us look at both the present situation and the future.

The SWO-ART analysis includes six elements:

- **Strengths:** what are the strengths and assets of the circus sector?
- **Weaknesses:** what are the weaknesses and challenges within the sector?
- **Opportunities:** what opportunities are available to further strengthen the sector?
- **Threats:** what risks and external factors pose potential obstacles?
- **Aspirations:** what are the ambitions and hopes of those working in the circus field? What is the sector's vision for its future?
- **Results:** what do external stakeholders expect from the sector? How do they envision the future of circus?

Specific challenges, both thematic and player-specific, were discussed in earlier chapters. This SWO-ART provides a sector-wide perspective, aiming to offer a summary and reflective analysis of common strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, ambitions, and expectations. To properly understand the circus sector, both the detailed and the overarching perspectives are needed, as they complement one another.

The findings of this analysis are an extension of the information from the previous chapters, supplemented by the input from focus groups held in spring 2024. The SWO-ART does not introduce new information, but provides a summary and reflection of what was previously covered. This allows us to make informed strategic choices for the future and to plot the sector's next steps.

STRENGTHS

THE PROFESSIONALISATION AND EXPANSION OF THE SECTOR

The Flemish circus sector has experienced accelerated development in recent years. The sector is gaining a new dimension, as circus professionals increasingly rely on their activities as a major source of income. Circus has evolved from a hobby sector into a fully fledged professional sector, complete with professional actors and structures that prioritise craftsmanship and creativity.

This professionalisation has led to an improvement in the quality, clout, and scale of the sector over the past few years. We see this reflected in both the educational and creation and presentation areas of the sector.

Recent years have shown a significant increase in the quality of applications, due to a focus on enhanced applicant support. This development simplifies access to structural funds for those who opt for it. This has the potential to create space for new applicants on the decree's project budget lines, but concerns were voiced numerous times during the Professionalisation Focus Group that the sector's accelerated professionalisation has raised the bar higher than before. We must be watchful for a possible Matthew effect, to ensure that entrants and smaller structures are not left behind and can develop.

YOUTH CIRCUSES AS A CATALYST FOR DEVELOPMENT

Youth circuses act as a catalyst for the development of the circus sector. Youth circuses offer valuable circus education, serving as a breeding ground for (young) circus talent, and also play a vital role as a meeting and practice space for circus performers. For artists who have pursued studies overseas, their Youth circus is often a 'home base,' where they re-establish connections with the Flemish circus sector. Youth circuses also employ artists, for example as instructors, during or upon completion of their creative careers. The eight structurally subsidised Youth circuses also serve as role models for safety and inclusion. Their cross-youth-circus, international, and reflective initiatives make them true driving forces within the entire sector.

Yet this valuable catalyst is under pressure. Due to financial unviability, several smaller initiatives have had to decrease or completely halt their operations in recent years. The decline threatens to weaken the circus education sector and could make it harder to guarantee a broad range of universally accessible services.

The sector is also in a period of change, with a new generation now taking on the work of the pioneers who first developed it 15-20 years ago. Therefore, the next few years will reveal how smoothly this 'changing of the guard' proceeds.

STRONG INTERNATIONAL POSITIONING

The Flemish circus sector has a strong international orientation and enjoys worldwide recognition. Flemish circus artists frequently train at international circus colleges, thus becoming part of a global network of circus professionals from the outset. These links facilitate a constant exchange of knowledge, skills, and artistic experiences internationally.

Many Flemish circus artists and organisations perform internationally, gaining acclaim for their artistic brilliance at festivals and on major stages. The sector has, as a result, developed a solid reputation as a consistent and professional partner within the international circus community. This strong international standing not only provides Flemish artists with opportunities to showcase themselves beyond the country's borders, but also attracts international artists and performances to Flanders.

However, working internationally requires a lot from artists and organisations and brings logistical and organisational challenges. Going forward, it is important to prioritise the sustainability of international touring, allowing the Flemish circus sector to continue to capitalise on its international networks and opportunities.

VERSATILITY AND FLEXIBILITY

Another important strength of the Flemish circus sector is the versatility of circus as an art form. Circus is constantly evolving, free from restrictive definitions. This openness allows artists and organisations to express their creativity and creates a rich diversity of artistic expression. The current dynamics underscore the relevance of circus in today's society by addressing emerging trends and societal needs.

This versatility, though beneficial, also demands that we focus on the core identity of circus in Flanders. Where all things seem possible, it remains important that the essential elements and values that make circus unique are kept in focus. Within the sector, there are diverse views of what circus is or should be, providing an opportunity for dynamic dialogue. Finding a balance between embracing new interpretations and maintaining the important characteristics of circus is essential. Through this reflection, the sector can nurture the richness and diversity of circus while preserving its essence.

WEAKNESSES

LIMITED SECTOR LEVERAGE

Despite its growth, the circus sector in Flanders remains relatively small. At present, there are 16 structurally subsidised organisations within the circus sector. Despite the high number of active professional circus artists and companies compared to other countries and regions, the number of structurally subsidised companies is notably low. Currently, only three companies receive structural subsidies.

Despite the close community and cooperation fostered by this small scale, the sector's general influence is simultaneously limited. To reinforce the position of circus within the wider cultural landscape, additional support is required. A dozen companies are ready to apply for structural support in the next round of applications. With sufficient resources, the sector's clout can increase significantly in the coming years.

FRAGMENTED SECTOR

The Flemish circus landscape is heterogeneous and fragmented. Despite its relatively small size, the sector encompasses a diverse range of disciplines, work forms, and organisational types, each with its own emphases and aspirations. This variety creates rich and diverse perspectives, but also makes it difficult to present a cohesive image as a sector. The needs and ambitions of youth circuses, heritage players, creation spaces, touring family circuses, emerging artists, and professional companies differ significantly.

This structure is not unique to the circus sector; however, it impedes the process of bringing all actors together around shared ambitions and viewpoints. This can sometimes impede the sector's ability to act collectively and work together on wider strategic ambitions, thereby restricting its cohesion and leverage. Furthermore, representing the interests of such a diverse sector is not straightforward. The lack of an overarching advocacy group is an additional handicap in this regard.

UNFAIR COMPENSATION

Attention to fair pay is a challenge within the entire performing arts sector, including the circus sector. Many circus professionals still do not receive proper compensation for their intensive work. This is in part because of the nature of circus performances, which frequently demand lengthy rehearsal periods to build muscle memory and ensure technical and safety standards. The time-consuming aspects of circus, such as warm-ups, cool-downs, and safety checks, are vital, yet they are infrequently compensated. This hinders the practical implementation of fair pay principles.

Because salaried employment is not yet prevalent in the sector, circus professionals are often compensated through constructions that do not build up social or pension rights. This problem arises in part because of the nature of the sector, in which the lines between volunteer and professional work are often blurred. Circus professionals, encompassing performers, teachers, and a range of other roles, are generally driven by personal passion and dedication. While this drive is admirable, it also leads to informal working conditions that hinder economic sustainability and social protection. Balancing this strong personal commitment with the need for formal, fair working conditions remains a challenge.

LACK OF ACCESSIBLE AND ADAPTED SPACES

Circus is a multifaceted art form that cannot take place in just any venue. Certain disciplines, such as aerial acrobatics and other acrobatic forms, such as bascule and partner acrobatics, require high spaces, adequate space and/or solid anchor points. In addition, youth circuses, which offer a wide range of disciplines, need venues that meet a multitude of different specific requirements. Circus companies travelling with tents, in turn, require accessible public spaces where they can pitch their tents.

Unfortunately, there are too few suitable sites in Flanders that meet these requirements, both in quantity and quality. This lack of appropriate spaces hinders not only the rehearsals and performances of circus artists, but also education and training in youth circuses. Throughout the process, from training and creation to presentation, there is a need for appropriate space to support the artistic development and growth of the sector.

A significant need exists for investment in infrastructure that is specifically adapted to the needs of the circus sector. This encompasses the construction of new specialised halls, as well as the improvement of existing spaces and the provision of accessible public spaces for marquee, venue, and street performances.

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL STRAIN

Professional circus is extremely physically and mentally demanding, just like elite sports. The demanding physical nature of circus performance means careers are frequently shorter, with a higher likelihood of injury and disability. This significantly hinders the ability to have a long-lasting career within circus. Despite a growing awareness of safe working conditions, the sector remains insufficiently prepared to provide the necessary protection and structure.

Attention to the mental and physical health of its members is essential for the sector. This includes providing support and resources to prevent injuries, as well as creating a culture where mental health is taken seriously. Investing in training, rehabilitation, and mental wellbeing can improve performance quality and contribute to the long-term careers of circus professionals.

OPPORTUNITIES

INCREASED POLICY ATTENTION AND SUPPORT

The increased policy attention offers a significant opportunity for the Flemish circus sector. The introduction of the Circus Decree saw the government recognise that circus is a fully fledged art form deserving of support. The increased support has driven a surge in professionalisation, resulting in a higher demand for structural resources and support. During the focus groups, structurally funded organisations indicated that this support had provided them with 'breathing space': they had moved from a survival mode to a space for experimentation.

This policy creates a firm framework for subsidy and support, opening up new opportunities for collaboration and development within the sector. It's vital that this support continues to increase to meet the growing demand and ensure the sector's sustainable development, for both artistic and educational initiatives, and to enhance the community impact of circus.

It's equally important to recognise that certain organisations consciously opt out of structural support as alternative options align more closely with their creative rationale. It underscores the necessity for a nuanced and thoughtful policy framework that caters to the diverse needs of the circus community, guaranteeing both artistic development and the health and wellbeing of all circus professionals.

INCREASED ACCEPTANCE OF CIRCUS WITHIN THE CULTURAL SECTOR

There's a growing acceptance of circus as an artistic discipline within the wider cultural field. This increased appreciation of circus opens doors to various venues, enabling circus performances to reach a wider audience and achieve greater variety in their presentations.

That being said, these new opportunities do create a number of challenges. The specific needs of circus performers are often not met by existing cultural infrastructures, creating practical and technical challenges. Finding workable solutions requires close cooperation between artists, technicians, and programmers.

Also of concern is the lack of a consistent application of the 'circus' label. This absence of systematic labelling creates confusion regarding the identity of circus performances. In an effort to attract a wider audience, some programmers opt to label circus performances as 'family-friendly' or refrain from explicitly identifying them as circus. This can negatively impact the unique identity of circus and restrict the visibility of the circus sector in its entirety.

GROWING DEMAND FOR CIRCUS EDUCATION

Flanders is experiencing a growing demand for circus education, which is reflected in the rising number of members at youth circuses. A growing number of people are discovering the unique opportunities that circus provides, artistically and socially. There's a growing recognition of circus as a valuable educational tool, aiding young people in developing physical skills, creativity, and personal growth. Circus offers a unique blend of physical, mental, and social challenges, teaching young people to cooperate, assess risks, and push their boundaries.

However, this growing interest also creates some challenges. The demand for quality and safe training places increasing pressure on youth circuses, resulting in a greater need for more and larger adapted spaces. Adequate resources and infrastructure are essential for youth circuses to handle this growth. Additionally, we must maintain attention on circus education beyond urban centres, so that circus remains accessible to all, irrespective of their location.

REPURPOSING BUILDINGS FOR CIRCUS ACTIVITIES

The repurposing of buildings, such as churches and other vacant spaces, represents a promising opportunity to address the lack of suitable infrastructure within the circus sector. The very specific spatial demands of many circus disciplines, for example, height and safe anchor points, make it difficult to operate within conventional spaces. Repurposing vacant buildings into circus-friendly spaces provides a partial solution to this infrastructure issue.

However, it's important to recognise that these repurposing projects create challenges. Modifying buildings to suit the specific needs of circus performers frequently demands substantial investment and expert knowledge. Furthermore, these new spaces need to meet safety standards and be accessible to all users. As such, it is essential for circus professionals, architects, and local government to collaborate, ensuring these repurposing initiatives are both functional and sustainable.

The role of local policy is crucial in this process. To make vacant buildings accessible for circus activities, governments can implement policies that support the repurposing of these spaces. This could be done, for instance, through the provision of financial incentives or by promoting collaborations between circus organisations and local communities. Effective local policies can help establish the necessary infrastructure and ensure that circus becomes more accessible to a broader audience.

THREATS

INAPPROPRIATE REGULATIONS, COUPLED WITH A LACK OF CIRCUS-SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE, HINDER SECTOR DEVELOPMENT

The ongoing lack of regulations that reflect the specific needs of circus organisations and performers remains a significant challenge for the circus sector. Current legislation and regulations, particularly regarding mobility, safety, and compensation frameworks, are often unsuitable for the sector's unique working conditions. This creates unnecessary administrative strain and complexity for artists and organisations. Circus professionals are confronted with a labyrinth of regulations that impedes their creativity and flexibility, occasionally leading them to adopt alternative, possibly less safe or legal, working practices.

Moreover, organisations providing support, such as Cultuurloket, trade unions, sector funds (Sociare, Performing Arts Social Fund), and suppliers (accountants, lawyers, Perpodium etc.), often do not have the necessary circus-specific expertise to properly help circus organisations advance. The absence of sector-specific knowledge makes it more challenging for circus professionals to secure appropriate support.

There is, especially at the local level, a lack of adequate attention to circus when policies and regulations are created. At the Flemish level, circus occasionally gets neglected when new subsidy schemes are introduced within the Department of Culture, Youth and Media, as was evident from the 'Pilot Projects for Legacies of Art Heritage'. Essentially, there needs to be a greater awareness and understanding of the unique requirements and situation of the circus sector, or a 'circus reflex', at all policy levels.

INSUFFICIENT GRANT FUNDS

Recent sector growth has resulted in a higher demand for structural funds; however, if the allocated budget does not increase proportionally, the sector will find itself in a precarious situation. The professionalisation and further development of the Flemish circus field largely depend on this support. Without sufficient structural funding, the sector's long-term viability is severely threatened. This is especially worrying because the sector is still developing and professionalising, and financial security is still unstable in many areas.

While grants represent only one funding stream, the lack of structural funds still constitutes a significant threat. Even though alternative funding sources can provide support, they are often still inadequate to ensure the required basic support. The sustainable growth and strength of the sector depend on stable and appropriate core funding.

CREATIVE PRESSURE

The strong emphasis on creation within the current grant system has led to a growing number of new circus performances. While this is a positive development for artistic innovation, it is creating increasing pressure on the available infrastructure, such as performance spaces, residencies and creation spaces. A growth in the number of creations may lead to a situation in which there is insufficient space to actually accommodate all these performances within the current circuit, which will in turn limit both performance opportunities and opportunities for further development.

In addition, it is crucial to recognise that having the scope for experimentation and artistic exploration without immediate pressure to create is critical. The current focus on producing new works can come at the expense of allowing artists to explore, investigate and innovate without the pressure to perform immediately. A balanced approach that supports both creation and scope for artistic research can ensure that the sector grows not only in numbers, but also in quality and diversity. This would prevent a situation in which valuable performances and innovative ideas do not receive the attention they deserve, while contributing to the sustainable development of circus as an art form in its own right.

STEREOTYPICAL PERCEPTION

One of the most complex challenges facing the circus industry in Flanders is the persistent stereotypical image of the term "circus" that lives on in people's minds. In part of the wider population, associations are often anchored in traditional conceptions that no longer reflect the current realities of the industry. These outdated images can result in distorting what circus has to offer today. In addition, there are negative connotations – such as the term "political circus" – that can undermine appreciation of the industry.

Although the sector has come a long way in recent years thanks to the broader openness within the cultural field and the increased visibility and representation of circus, it appears that we are still striving to combat these persistent stereotypes.

Breaking down these stereotypes is essential to enable circus to develop further and gain in acceptance within the broader cultural landscape. Both the industry itself and the media and cultural institutions can play an active role in promoting the versatility of circus, in order to reach a wider audience and increase appreciation for this art form.

LITTLE ANCHORING WITHIN EDUCATION AND OTHER POLICY AREAS

While supporting circus in all its forms within a single decree offers many advantages, it often makes it more difficult to forge strong connections with the rest of the arts field, as well as with other policy areas, such as education and welfare.

As a result, opportunities for collaboration and cross-fertilisation may be missed, and there is a risk that circus, as an art form but also as a means of personal development and social connection, may become isolated from other sectors.

The absence of strong anchoring within education and other policy areas provides fewer opportunities to fully engage in research, reflection and artistic development within the circus arts. This deficit is felt not only within the industry itself, but also in academia. There is hardly any scientific research into circus; within higher education, there are few initiatives to put circus on the map as a subject of study or research. Although the attention it is receiving is growing, circus is either still often forgotten, or is solely of interest as a topic of historical research. This lack of attention to circus in academia hinders the development of in-depth knowledge and insights, whether artistic, social or educational.

Strengthening links with other policy areas and encouraging research are therefore crucial as a means of countering that threat. This will allow the sector to embed itself more effectively within the broader cultural and social landscape.

ASPIRATIONS (OF THE CIRCUS SECTOR ITSELF)

The aspirations of the Flemish circus sector are ambitious and focus on strengthening social impact, inclusion and cultural innovation. The sector sees circus as a unique and powerful medium that can connect people of all ages, backgrounds and cultures. There is a strong ambition to break down barriers and put accessibility centre stage, in order to give everyone the opportunity to participate in or enjoy circus, both recreationally and professionally.

In addition, parties that are active in the circus industry strive to have a positive impact on people's lives. This ranges from bringing joy and wonder during performances to promoting personal development and self-confidence through circus education. Circus has the potential to enrich lives, not only as an art form, but also as a tool for social change.

Culturally, the sector is determined to occupy a firm and lasting position in the Flemish arts field and consolidate its international reputation. Circus aims to further establish itself as an art form in its own right, not only as a form of entertainment, but also as a field that contributes towards cultural dialogue and innovation.

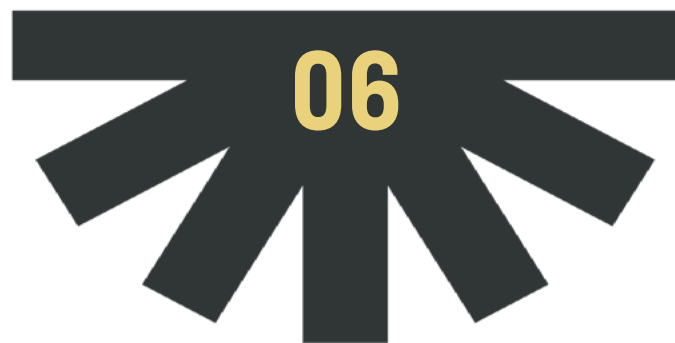
By pursuing these aspirations, the circus sector in Flanders hopes not only to further its own development, but also to make a valuable contribution to the broader cultural society. The commitment to inclusion, social impact and sustainability are thereby essential elements that are guiding the future of circus in Flanders.

OUTCOMES (OUTSIDE EXPECTATIONS)

The circus sector has the power to make the broader cultural field more accessible and inclusive. Circus is increasingly being recognised as a valuable tool for participation and can contribute to cultural policies aimed at engaging diverse groups. Thanks to its playful nature and physical accessibility, circus offers a unique way for people to participate in arts and culture, especially for those who would otherwise have a harder time finding their way to cultural offerings. This means that circus is in a position to make an important contribution towards a more inclusive cultural society, where everyone feels welcome.

For a number of years now, policymakers have been increasingly recognising and utilising the potential of circus as a way of putting Flanders even more strongly on the international map. 'Circus in Vlaanderen' has grown into a strong brand and Flemish circus organisations are leading the way in Europe in many areas. This not only strengthens the international reputation of the circus industry, but also the cultural influence of Flanders. The recent coalition agreement explicitly mentions the international potential.

CONCLUSION



(POLICY) CHALLENGES FOR THE CIRCUS SECTOR

The Flemish circus industry has reached an important point in its development. The dynamic development of the sector, aided by the introduction of the Circus Decree, has created a range of new opportunities, but has also revealed structural bottlenecks that may hinder further growth and professionalisation. The SWO-ART analysis in the previous chapter identifies the sector's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and outlines a complex but promising situation.

To enable the sustainable development of the circus sector and take full advantage of the strong international positioning and diversity that the sector has to offer, it is essential to address some priority (policy) challenges. These challenges are significant, both for the sector itself and for policymakers, and by addressing them effectively, the Flemish circus sector can strengthen its social impact and further consolidate its position within the broader cultural landscape.

THE NEED FOR ADDITIONAL DECRETAL OPPORTUNITIES

The Circus Decree has provided a significant impetus to the development of the circus sector, which means that the further professionalisation of the sector is now within reach. There are opportunities to further deepen and broaden the effects of this decree. For example, additional funds will help new organisations join in the next round of grants. In addition, refining the decree's application could help to better serve a wider range of stakeholders, such as distribution agencies, production houses and researchers. This could also reduce the work pressure that exists among circus professionals. Enabling experimentation through temporary grant schemes can provide new insights on how functions such as development and reflection can be supported even more effectively.

HUMAN AND ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

Despite growing recognition at home and abroad, circus professionals continue to face significant challenges regarding fair pay and access to social benefits. The SWO-ART analysis highlights the need to create a caring and sustainable context that encompasses both human and economic aspects. An integrated safety policy, which pays attention to technical, physical and psychosocial aspects, is indispensable in that regard. In addition, collective agreements and adequate incentives to ensure fair pay can also make an important contribution to working conditions in the industry.

SPACE FOR CIRCUS

The growth of the circus industry is increasingly highlighting the need for suitable space for circus activities. The lack of infrastructure requires urgent attention. The repurposing of existing buildings such as churches can form part of the solution. Even providing anchor points already in the design phase when building new cultural, youth or sports infrastructure is also a point requiring attention, however. Encouraging the sharing of knowledge about the special infrastructure needs of the circus sector, such as elevation and anchor points, may also help to bring facilities into line with its needs. Increasing the accessibility and availability of public space for circus activities, both tented and outdoor, is also important in this regard.

FUNDAMENTAL INTERNATIONAL ESTABLISHMENT

The SWO-ART analysis emphasises that the international role of the Flemish circus sector is essential for its development and visibility. It is also clear that temporary support for bilateral collaborations is not enough. There is a need for an integrated long-term strategy which, in addition to creating visibility, will provide scope for the sharing of knowledge and experience on an international level. Promoting initiatives that develop sustainable models will enable the sector to further strengthen its international dynamism and mobility, which not only promotes cultural exchange but also contributes towards the development of the sector as a whole.

ATTENTION TO EXPERIMENTATION AND REFLECTION

The circus arts are booming and have great potential, but need oxygen for development and to be able to innovate in a way that exists separately from the pressure to create. Furthermore, there is also a lack of reflection – both in the sector itself and in the media and academic circles – on the subject of circus, which is hindering the development of in-depth insight and critical evaluation. To ensure that circus is able to develop further and in a sustainable way as an art form of the future, it is important to provide full and ample scope for experimentation and reflection.

ESTABLISHING THE CORRECT IMAGE

Although circus is gaining recognition as an art form in its own right, the industry is continuing to face persistent stereotypes that are hindering its development. Promoting a broader and more accurate image of circus can help break down these prejudices. Initiatives that showcase circus in all its diversity and pay attention to careful communication and correct terminology are therefore crucial. Increasing general knowledge about circus, for example through publications and informing and engaging policy and media, will contribute towards a better understanding and appreciation of this art form.

ADVOCACY

Despite the many opportunities and challenges that the Flemish circus sector has to offer, it lacks a central advocate that effectively represents the sector. What is needed is a body that forms the link between the circus industry and policymakers and can advocate for the interests of everyone involved, from performers to organisation leaders and support professionals. An advocate will be able to help clearly articulate the sector's overarching needs and aspirations, set priorities and contribute towards a shared strategy for the future. This would not only promote cohesion within the sector, but also ensure a stronger voice both within the broader cultural context and in all areas where important decisions are made that affect the further development and professionalisation of the circus sector.

Concerted efforts by both industry and policymakers are needed to achieve sustainable solutions in all these areas and secure the future of circus.

WHAT WILL THE FUTURE BRING?

We stand today at a defining moment in the development of the sector: on 1 May 2025, the structural files on the circus decree will be submitted and additional resources will be needed to provide appropriate and sustainable support for the sector's dynamism and growth. The collective exercise of which this document is the result will feed into the individual plans of the organisations that are writing applications. Furthermore, the 'sketch' also makes clear what further support is desired or needed, both from the support centre, and within the relevant policy. In that regard, it is not merely a matter of financial support, but also about ensuring that the attention that is given circus within policymaking becomes even more embedded within the sphere of culture policy in the form of a closer interaction across policy domains.

At the time of writing, the circus sector in Flanders is undergoing a pronounced evolution, thanks to the unique interplay between industry dynamics and government support. Nevertheless, keeping circus on the policy agenda remains an ongoing challenge. This is not illogical in the case of a niche sector that operates within a predominantly international context and is developing all the time. In fact, the policy instruments available to the government, the most important of which is the circus decree, contain a number of gaps. An evaluation is therefore needed. It will be very important to ensure that such an evaluation begins by examining the sector's own laws, characteristics, needs and opportunities and not by copying and pasting existing related decrees.

Circus offers a great return on investment: the Flemish circus sector is highly regarded internationally and Flanders is a pioneer in circus education. It is therefore not without reason that circus features on Event Flanders' radar: there are plans to put Flanders on the map as a circus region between now and 2029. Opportunities also exist on a heritage level to move towards wider international recognition through UNESCO by obtaining recognition, from the authorities in Flanders, of circus as intangible heritage. For the description of the circus community, the (text) material collected and written out in this landscape sketch provides a good basis.

Circuscentrum is aiming to further develop its role as a knowledge hub and also intends to utilise the challenges and opportunities revealed by the landscape sketch for itself as a means of informing its own strategic choices. The sustainable professionalisation of the sector will play a key part in this, with a particular focus on strengthening the weaker links within the ecosystem.

The challenges of inclusion and ecology align with general trends to which society must relate. This is where it is important as an industry to look beyond the walls and identify good practices from within the sector and disseminate them more widely. In the areas of professional development, international working, safety and space, the circus DNA has a more pronounced effect and it is important to work on a strategy that corresponds with the uniqueness of the sector.

It will also be important in the coming years to put the focus on circus as an art form on the agenda within art education and academia so that practical knowledge is also developed there. Although the research programmes, such as those of CIRKLABO, Grensgeval and De Groote Stooringe, are valuable processes that engage in artistic research and reflection, the number of initiatives remains too few to adequately nurture the sector and foster its development. It is possible that the creation spaces or other structures will create greater scope for this in the next policy period. That is something that definitely deserves support. After the research project The Circus Dialogues was discontinued in 2023, a gap opened up in that regard. Through the support of a diverse range of actors (festivals, creation spaces, companies, youth circuses, etc.), the circus decree focuses on various functions, but the attention being given to the functions of 'development' and 'reflection' is still not sufficiently embedded within the funding instruments that the decree has at its disposal. An additional incentive in this area is therefore needed.

In the medium term, it makes sense to give newer players in the field – including those in charge of distribution, production support and management – access to the decree. Here, too, it is appropriate to examine, in close consultation with the field, which 'model' is most future-proof.

Finally, the landscape sketch of the circus sector exposes a whole number of research needs that we will compile into a specific research agenda, which we will actively bring to the attention of policy and academia in the coming years. From its mission as a knowledge centre, Circuscentrum will further complete and focus this agenda and include the demand for research resources in its policy plan.

TO BE CONTINUED...

As far as the further development of the circus industry and the circus arts is concerned, it is important that the broad reflection that the landscape sketch aims to be develops and becomes a continuous reflex and source of material and inspiration for structured data collection and further research.

We believe that the mere fact that there is a landscape sketch of the circus sector will, in itself, play its part in fostering the correct image. It is an important step in the recognition of the sector and of an art form that will therefore hopefully also receive more opportunities to develop further and secure its unique position as a result.

The expectations are high and so are the ambitions. It is now a case of ensuring sufficient clout and the future of the circus will look bright.





APPENDIX

ANNEX 1: READERS

The text was proofread in several stages. First, Circuscentrum staff proofread each text based on their area of expertise.

In a second phase, the texts were proofread by Tijs Vastesaeger and external readers who were chosen for their extensive knowledge of the circus sector:

- **Liv Laveyne:** performing arts programmer at cultural centre De Grote Post; editorial board member of Etcetera; and editorial board member of Circusmagazine.
- **Maarten Verhelst:** Editor-in-chief of Circusmagazine.

Several staff members of the Department of Culture, Youth and Media also proofread the texts.

ANNEX 2: FOCUS GROUPS

A total of seven focus groups were organised between 5 March and 11 June 2024. These were supervised by Tijs Vastesaege (Doenker).

Each focus group aimed to be as diverse as possible, with participants from different parts of the circus sector.

Focus group 1: Professionalisation

Date and location: 5 March 2024, Leuven

Attendees: Axel Guérin (Not Standing), Alexander Wijsen (circuscommissie/Bouglione), Lieven Leemans (Circolito), Joren Decooman (Artiest/CIRKLABO), Jonas Van Soom (CIRKLABO), Xavier Depaepe (Wiener Circus), Katrijn De Bleser (Sarakasi), Hanna De Vletter (artiest), Marth De Kinder (artiest/Cirkus in Beweging), Esther Maas (Not Standing), Klaartje Brouns (JE BUR0), Els Degryse (Cirque Plus/artiest), Aukelyn Allary (PERPLX), Nele Vertriest (Circuscentrum), Peter Smets (Circuscentrum)

Focus group 2: Space and infrastructure

Date and location: 25 March 2024, Brussels

Attendees: Thomas Guillaume (El Circo D'ell Fuego), Mathilde Renson (Circus Zonder Handen), Renaud Onderdonck (Circusplaneet), Anne Elst (De Machienerie/ Rode Boom), Tom Cools (Circus Atelier Salto), Lies Timperman (CC Mechelen), Jonas Van Soom (CIRKLABO), Stef Geers (Theater Muto), Nick Verginis (onderzoeker), Ilse Devylder (De Vliegende Mier), Ief Gillis (De Wenkbrauwery), Gab Bondewel (De Clinch), Noemi De Clercq (Circuscentrum)

Focus group 3: Safety

Date and location: 25 April 2024, Antwerp

Attendees: Dré Demet (MAD Festival), Julia Gut (Artiest/Circusplaneet), Renaud Verbiest (Cirkus in Beweging), Wim Verheyen (El Circo D'ell Fuego), Toon Van Gramberen (THERE THERE Company), Kim Houben (Dommelhof), Jente Besters (Compagnie That's It/El Circo D'ell Fuego), Xian Vancanneyt (Circus Zonder Handen), Kristof Mentens (Paljasso), Rinus Samyn (Technieker), Jan Peyls (Circuscentrum)

Focus group 4: Ecology

Date and location: 8 May 2024, Leuven

Attendees: Matthias Vermael (Bestuur Circuscentrum/Netwerk Duurzame Mobiliteit), Jonas Van Soom (CIRKLABO), Marthe (stagiair CIRKLABO), Jessika Devliegere (Cirkus in Beweging), Inge Loodsteen (Bestuur Circuscentrum), Kurt De Mey (Rode Boom)

Focus group 5: Traditional circus

Date and location: 21 May 2024, Ghent

Attendees: Richard Korritnig (Circus Barones), Roland Vermeylen, Marc Boon (Sint in de Piste), Nanosh Ronaldo (Circus Ronaldo), Dolly Pauwels (Circus Pipo), Dennys Heppenheimer (Circus Pipo), Freddy Vindevogel, Dieter Vindevogel, Noemi De Clercq (Circuscentrum), Jan Peyls (Circuscentrum)

Focus group 6: Inclusion

Date and location: 30 May 2024, Ghent

Attendees: Madonna Lenaert (artiest), Margot Jansens (Detail Company), Loes Messens (Circus Zonder Handen), Els Degryse (Cirque Plus/Artiest), Bara Adolfova (Caravancircusnetwork), Elga Pollet (Woesh), Judith Kroes (Circus Zonder Handen), Katrien (HoGent), Noemi De Clercq (Circuscentrum)

Focus group 7: International work

Date and location: 11 June 2024, Ghent

Attendees: Gwendolien Sabbe (De Spil), Lisa Patoor (De Machienerie), Jan Victoor (Gevleugelde Stad), Emma Ketels (JE BUR0), Anne Elst (Rode Boom), Toon Van Gramberen (THERE THERE Company), Tom Landeloos (Plein de Cirque), Sanne Hubert (Vincent Company), Celine Verkest (Miramiro), Annelies Claesens, Martine Linear (Dommelhof), Stef Geers (Theater Muto), Séverine Vanderstighelen (Circuscentrum), Noemi De Clercq (Circuscentrum),

ANNEX 3: LIST CULTURAL CENTRES

CC	MUNICIPALITY
252 CC	Ekeren
30 CC	Leuven
CC Achterolmen	Maaseik
CC Belgica	Dendermonde
CC Beringen	Beringen
CC Binder	Puurs-Sint-Amands
CC Blankenberge	Blankenberge
CC Brasschaat	Brasschaat
CC Brugge	Bruges
CC Casino	Houthalen-Helchteren
CC CasinoKoksijde	Koksijde
CC Coloma*	Sint-Pieters-Leeuw
CC De Abdij	Geraardsbergen
CC De Adelberg	Lommel
CC De Bogaard	Sint-Truiden
CC De Borre	Bierbeek
CC de Brouckere	Torhout
CC De Fabriek	Sint-Lievens-Houtem
CC De Factorij	Zaventem
CC De Grote Post	Ostend
CC De Herbakker	Eeklo
CC De Kimpel	Bilzen
CC De Kruisboog	Tienen
CC de Meent	Alseberg
CC De Plomblom	Ninove
CC De Ploter	Ternat
CC De Schakel	Waregem
CC De Spil	Roeselare
CC De Steiger	Boom
CC De Steiger vzw	Menen
CC De Velinx	Tongeren
CC De Warande	Turnhout
CC De Warandepoort*	Tervuren
CC De Werf	Aalst
CC de Werft	Geel
CC 'de Wissel'	Wingene
CC Den Blank	Overijse
CC Den Tap	Lendelede
CC Diest	Diest
CC Gildhof	Tielt
CC Hasselt vzw	Hasselt

CC	MUNICIPALITY
CC Het Bolwerk	Vilvoorde
CC Het Gasthuis	Aarschot
CC Het Perron	Ieper
CC het Spoor	Harelbeke
CC Jan Tervaert	Hamme
CC Kapellen	Kapellen
CC Knokke-Heist	Knokke-Heist
CC Kortrijk	Kortrijk
CC Kruispunt	Diksmuide
CC Lokeren	Lokeren
CC Maasmechelen	Maasmechelen
CC Mechelen	Mechelen
CC Meeuwen-Gruitrode	Meeuwen-Gruitrode
CC Mol	Mol
CC Mortsel	Mortsel
CC MUZE	Heusden-Zolder
CC Nova	Wetteren
CC Paletthe	Overpelt
CC Schoten	Schoten
CC Sint-Niklaas	Sint-Niklaas
CC Strombeek	Grimbergen
CC Stroming	Berlare
CC Stroming Evergem	Evergem
CC 't Schaliken	Herentals
CC 't Vondel	Halle
CC Temse	Temse
CC Ter Dilft	Bornem
CC Ter Vesten	Beveren
CC Wevelgem	Wevelgem
CC Zoetegem*	Zottegem
CC Zwaneberg	Heist-op-den-Berg
CC C-Mine	Genk
CC Westrand	Dilbeek
Cultureel Centrum Lanaken	Lanaken
Cultureel Centrum Leopoldsburg	Leopoldsburg
Cultuurhuis De Zeepziederij	Bree
Cultuurhuis Emotia*	Erpe-Mere
GC Den Egger	Scherpenheuvel-Zichem
Leietheater	Deinze
Liers CC	Lier

*As of season 2024-2025

ANNEX 4: FESTIVALS

Festivals with circus programming in 2023, which were used for an analysis of the distribution of circus companies across festivals.

FESTIVAL	LOCATION
Zomer Van Antwerpen	Antwerp
Gevleugelde Stad	leper
Brouwsels op Straat	Nazareth-Eke
De kleine stooringe	Roeselare
Sinjur Circo	Antwerp
De Grote Sierk	Beveren
Plein de Cirque	Turnhout
CIRKL	Leuven
Theater aan Twater	Boom
Cirque Plus	Brugge
StraPatZen	Ternat
Cirk!Aalst	Aalst
Miramiro Festival	Ghent
MAD Festival	Antwerp
Visueel Festival Visuel	Sint-Agatha-Berchem
Theater op de Markt	Hasselt/Neerpelt
De Donderdagen	Ninove
CIRKLABO Festival	Leuven
Sierk Masjiek	Ronse
Theater aan Zee	Ostend

ANNEX 5: COMPANIES

In 2024, Circuscentrum, in collaboration with students from the Arteveldehogeschool, conducted some extensive desk research into the international nature of circus companies in Flanders. This study identified the composition, creation and distribution of performances by 50 companies in 2023. These are companies that were listed on the circusinvlaanderen.be website during the research period (February to August 2024), regardless of their funding status through the Circus Decree.

- !UKBUM! Collective
- 15FEET6
- ADM
- Alexander Vantournhout / Not Standing
- Amoukanama
- Artichoke Company
- Be Flat
- Bert & Fred
- Bert Berg
- Callebaut & De Broeck
- Camille Paycha
- Charel & Co
- Cie Balltazar
- Cie Pol & Freddy
- Circ Rodini
- Circumstances
- Circus Katoen
- Circus Marcel
- Circus Ronaldo
- Cirkanto
- Collectif Malunés
- Common Ground
- Compagnie Krak
- Compagnie Pilolabo
- Compagnie That's It
- Company Midnight
- D'Irque & Fien
- De Machienerie
- De Wenkbrauwerij
- Detail Company
- Duo Nu
- Familiar Faces
- Gadjo Dilo Circus
- Gedachtegang / Jakobe Geens
- Grensgeval
- Hanna De Vletter
- Jam.shenanigans
- Janni Van Goor/Walser vzw
- Joren De Cooman
- Les Argonautes
- Marvelous Adventures Group
- Post Uit Hessdalen
- Rode Boom
- Ruben Mardulier
- Side-Show
- Sinking Sideways
- Sur Measure
- Teatime Company
- THERE THERE company
- Zinzi & Evertjan



COLOPHON

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