

BRISTOL CITY OF CIRCUS

CROSSING THE LINE

RISQUÉ - SLIGHTLY INDECENT AND LIABLE TO SHOCK

Oxford English Dictionary

Early circus could be found in fairs, often unruly places as Samuel Colman's painting exploring the vices and virtues of St James's Fair suggests.

Inside the circus, female performers could be expected to expose a little more flesh. Safety required trapeze artists, acrobats, rope dancers to be free of the constraints of Victorian attire and Victorian taboos.



St James's Fair, Samuel Colman, 1824
Bristol Museum and Art Gallery

"The Nymph of the floating Veil"

"Mrs Moseley's Evolution's on the Tightrope"

"Mrs MacKintosh, The Pride of Caledonia, whose equestrian exercises are both peculiar and interesting".

Replica playbill excerpts. Courtesy of the British Newspaper Archives

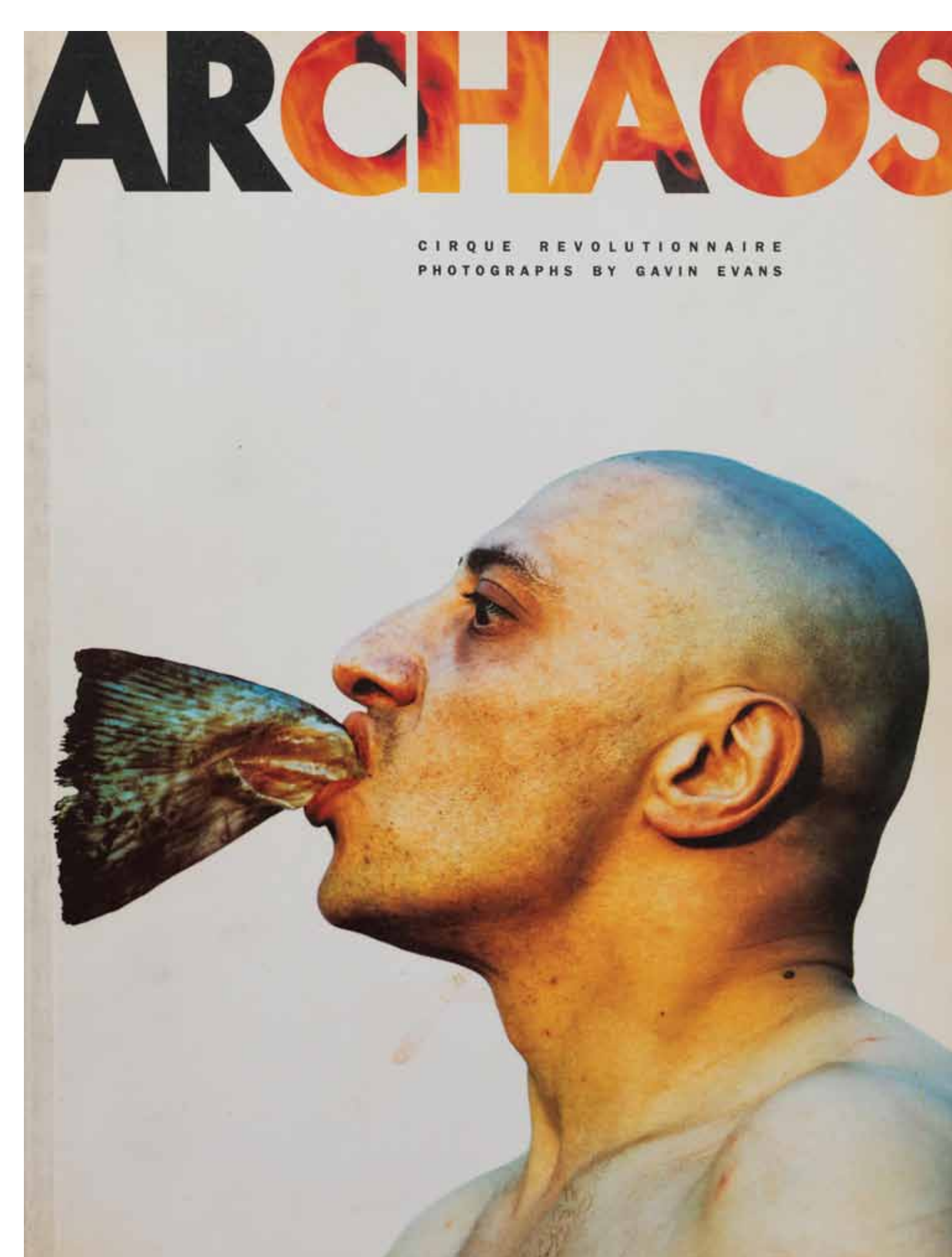


Image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The circus offered an escape from the conventions of the period. Lulu was a celebrated aerialist. She was strong, supple, daring and corseted. Once she had been outed as a man, and the adopted son of The Great Farinni, Lulu continued to perform in corset, hair oiled and moustache trimmed.

During the 20th century, the spectacle became more orthodox, appealing to a mainstream family audience.

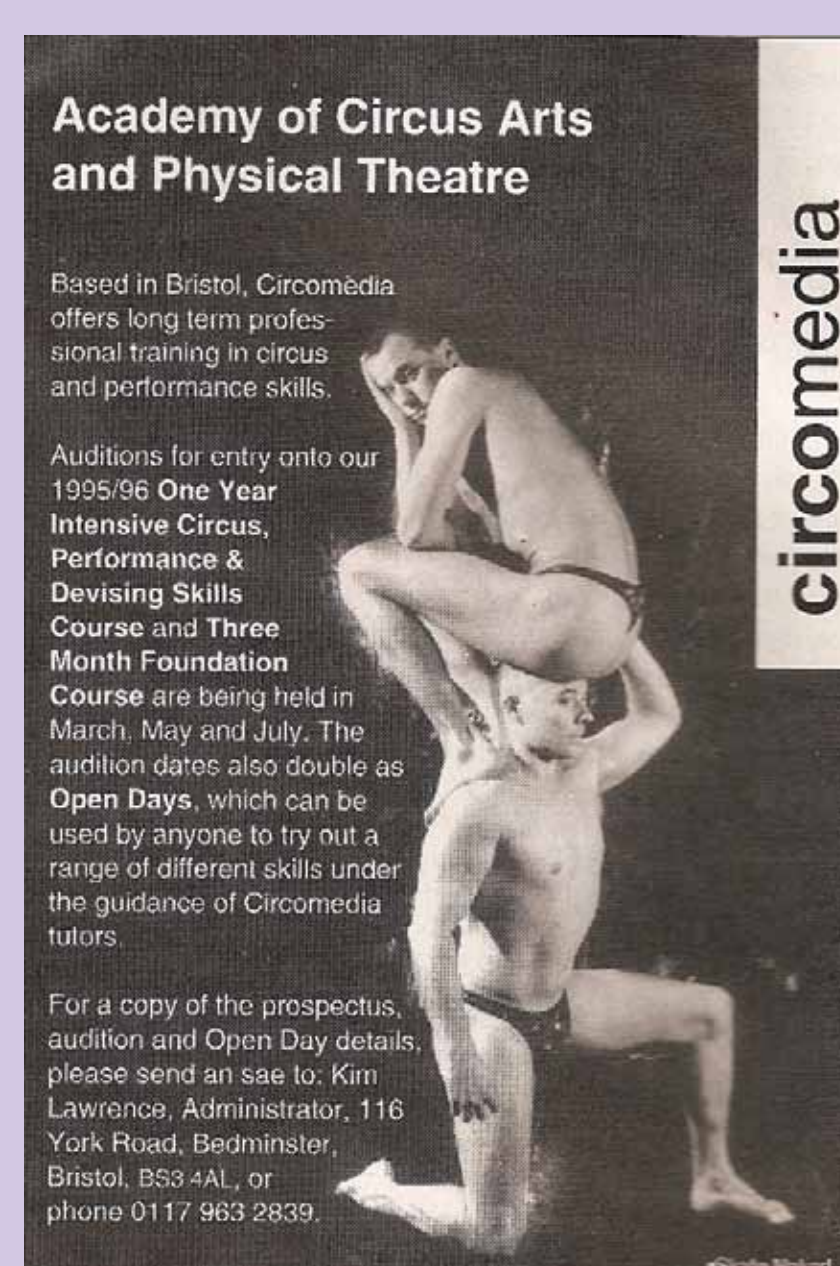
In 1990, Gerry Cottle brought the French circus, Archaos to perform on the Downs, but after hearing how 'risqué' they were, the Down's Committee banished them to wasteland at the edge of the city.



Archaos Souvenir Programme, 1990
Courtesy of Richard Higgs

"They were coming to the Downs, but people got wind of how radical they were and they got banned...we made sure they were banned."

Gerry Cottle



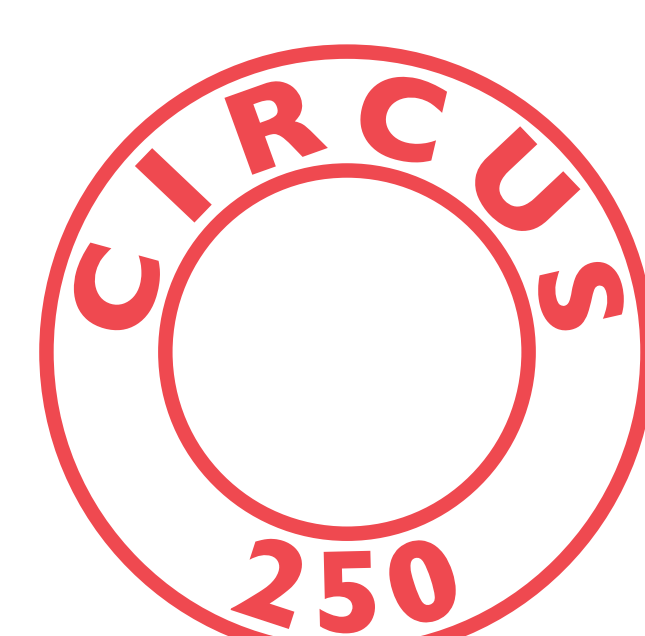
Advertisement for Circomedia featuring Skate Naked.
Image courtesy of Fool Time Archive

Archaos manipulated the traditional form with fire, chainsaws, naked acrobats and a disregard for convention, inspiring the next generation of Bristol's circus artists.

Invisible Circus' production of Carneyville continued this tradition, influenced by Archaos and St James's Fair. They created an 'Unfair', sideshows which questioned society's norms and asked the audience to step outside of their comfort zones, blurring the line between audience and performer.



Carneyville 2009 Photo: Spencer Dixey



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