ART REVIEW

New Circus and the Ethics of Safety Management: A Review of *EZ* (Elena Zanzu)

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Elena Zanzu's *EZ* fits neatly into the emerging domain of "new circus"—performances that leave behind the brash ringmaster glam of the traditional circus and the Cirque du Soleil *internationale* of "contemporary circus." Discipline means something different here. New Circus allows performers to show off not only their physical prowess but new heights of conceptual enquiry: both Zanzu and their collaborator, Carla Rovira Pitarch, have backgrounds in philosophy and social work. With a more eclectic range of performance forms possible to mix into the old repertoire of tricks, New Circus is genre bending. Unafraid to seek validation beyond the walls of its discipline, the social utility of such performance forms to provoke and stage ethicality is so far untapped. This spirit is what makes work like Zanzu's—which questions care, consent, and the politics of safety—fascinatingly resonant with ethical dilemmas in business. In the rest of this review, I focus on the concept of safety, allowing my past life as an adviser in the health, safety, and environment department of an offshore drilling company to permeate my analysis.

If art reviews in *BEQ* aim to bring "life" to the potentially technocratic nature of business practice (Hjorth 2022), nowhere is this more significant than in occupational safety. Whether on rigs, in factories, or on hospital wards, workers in so-called high-performance industries are constantly asked to combine systems thinking with the human world of emotional and physical uncertainty. This is where Zanzu (they/them) comes in. *EZ* (see Figure 1) is a circus piece with one performer, a recorded voice, and an improvising audience member. The show has emerged from R&D work through the European Union–wide 'Circus Next: Laureate' programme and was performed, on this occasion in 2022, in Copenhagen, Denmark. Zanzu is an aerialist, and much of the performance involves them suspended from the ceiling and counterweighted by other hanging objects. The first part of the show involves just this: the cropped-haired, black-clothed Zanzu swinging gently from a hip harness around a tank of water, eventually submerging their head into it. They begin to induce the flickering of fear and excitement (as circus has always done) when Zanzu begins a methodical tying process for another suspension with jute rope—but this time, around their face.

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Figure 1: ***EZ*** **Elena Zanzu**
Note. Photograph copyright Mila Ercoli.

Safety is endlessly complicated for management and evaluation because its causes and correlates are entangled. Pulling one end might loosen the tension or deepen the knot. Traditional wisdom has embedded into safety consciousness the idea that poor performance can be detected at every level. From chemical plants to oil rigs, bad safety reports imply that high levels of minor incidents—accident near misses, sloppy protocols, and worker mishaps—could easily align into a dreaded Swiss cheese of holes in safety systems. Catastrophic failure can occur through the alignment of "decisions, actions, and interactions among employees, organizations, and technologies" (Ramanujam 2018, 230), even far beyond the physical site of operations. Then, boom! In fear of such chains of error, the regulation, monitoring, and disciplining of micro-incidents appears to make sense, weighed against the severe risk of overall safety system failure. The problem with this logic (which has ethical implications for how a worker's mistakes are managed) is that its evidence is shaky. Counting the "negatives" (the mistakes) does not reduce a stubborn residue of safety errors, even after decades of top-down safety management (Dekker 2017). Minor mistakes just as easily come as the natural consequence of workers *overperforming* systems—improvising when they need to, often undetected—as from them failing to live up to standards. Notably, one of the biggest disasters ever in the offshore oil industry—the oil spill on Deepwater Horizon—occurred exactly as safety professionals were congratulating the rig managers for a record seven years of no "lost-time" injuries!

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After braiding the rope around their face, Zanzu is pulled to standing height. The rope that snakes its way above them into the ceiling has tightened: they look rigid as a puppet hanging from one string. Then, to my stomach's clench of disbelief and pain by proxy, Zanzu pulls on another rope hanging next to them and begins to be hoisted —headfirst—into the air. Criss-crosses from the rope stretch their face taut. The technique is a novel blending of the circus-classic hair suspension and the Japanese rope-tying practice of *shibari.* After almost reaching the ceiling, Zanzu spreads their arms like an angel and winches their way—with anguishing slowness for the silent crowd—to the ground. But they are far from done.

Zanzu has previously reflected that their life as an aerialist involved a monological form of communication: "the safest space was in the air, in solitude" (Zanzu 2022). The same could of course be said about academics: many of us feel most comfortable in the solipsistic abstract. But ethics is charged precisely by our interconnectedness. There is real risk that another might be hurt. Our capacity to inflict harm lives like a silent circus big cat, only ever temporarily tamed beside us. I watch as Zanzu, speaking through the pre-recorded voice, invites a volunteer on stage. The interaction will lead to Zanzu experiencing pain, but consensually, they inform us. Zanzu establishes a physical language of safe words with the participant: a code by which each can communicate whether they should stop the show. On that cold night in Copenhagen, the volunteer was a burly male—a stark contrast to Zanzu's smaller frame. They finish their agreements (Zanzu never actually speaking, dependent on both the volunteer and the offstage operator of the recorded voice), and the volunteer is strapped into a harness. Facing each other, both on tiptoes by the tension of their counterbalanced ropes, Zanzu still only attached to the rope by face and head, we register the possibility of danger.

In the performance's final, electrifying stanza, the volunteer on the end of Zanzu's rope is encouraged to take his feet off the ground. He spins like a child on a swing. He pivots in a great circle around the edges of the stage. Throughout, Zanzu (or rather, their face) acts as the counterweight: forced up to their toes and beyond by the force of the rope, staggering and sliding in reflection of the volunteer's sun dance around the centre. The duet is mesmerising and uncomfortable because, as when Zanzu speaks of a "pact in place between artist, audience and audience volunteers" (Zanzu 2022), I am reminded just how much of safety management happens 'in the wings' of our lives. The subtleties of urban design bracket these realities out: just beyond the theatre venue, in Copenhagen's sprawling streets, citizens quite happily ride bicycles mere feet parallel to speeding hunks of metal, so neutralised to danger that their hair blows free of a helmet.

Safety functions often as an unnoticed stasis. Its ethical charge comes (for fellow *BEQ* writer Robert Allinson) from the point in which professionals attempt to "alter the status quo" (McMahon 2002, 101). Yet, *EZ* demonstrates the nexus of relationships within which we can innocently fail and our complicity in the collapse of stasis into danger. Evoking the bondage practices that surround *shibari*, there is clearly deep, systemic care in the performance of consensual pain experienced in *EZ*. It is a structure built to offer play and exploration as a vital practice—care that surrounds (or perhaps actively feeds off of) pain and danger. It reminds us why the modern

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discourse of "consent" is complex: that none of us—either as workers or as humans—are always sure of the levels of discomfort, pain, and risk to which we are open or of others' complicity in this negotiation. Instead of reaching for individual culpability in whether procedures have been followed, we might shift ethical emphasis to the "conversation, mutual exploration, curiosity, [and] uncertainty" (Angel 2021) in how humans negotiate and scaffold safety. *EZ* intrigues us because it stages that which is otherwise hidden, using circus to inject just the right amount of uncertainty and risk.

What responsibility does safety engender? Zanzu's work is held together by jute rope: a bristly fibre from a hair-like plant, exact word origins unknown. But in Copenhagen, the show was played to an audience of latter-day *jutes*: inhabitants of the peninsula Jutland, companions to Angles and Saxons alike. Appreciating such semiotic resonances—across mediums, traditions, and lineages—might well help us develop a more healthy and mature debate around the ethics of safety practices we all help to hold in place. In safety science, thinking has turned (slowly) toward supporting workers who fail: seeing those who accidently rip a hole in a safety system as an *expert* in the risk they unwittingly exploited. As theorists of the ethics of business, we might do well to heed a version of this credo: not to forget that our lives are maintained by the dangers in which others put themselves and through whose eyes we might strengthen our own practices of safety and care. Opportunities to learn and embed insights from coal-face experiences are everywhere if we choose to recognise them. After all, manual workers on oil rigs are still referred to in the same terms as were historic circus performers: as roustabouts.

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