

## Abyssal Choreography: The Ropedancer's Unsettling Agency and Philippe Petit's Walks

Daphna Ben-Shaul 

### Introduction

**O**n May 18, 1987, at 6:00 p.m., Philippe Petit opened the Israel Festival Jerusalem with a performance titled *Bridge for Peace*—a spectacular high-wire walk above the Valley of Hinnom from the city's west side to the east side. I was there in the vast audience, watching the astounding walk that became a part of Jerusalem's iconographic landscape. This walk was enacted thirteen years after Petit performed his unauthorized walk between the Twin Towers of New York's World Trade Center on the morning of August 7, 1974. The difference between the walks is prominent—both in their circumstances and context, as well as in the volume of publicity and discourse that accompanies the New York event to this day. In contrast, the event in Jerusalem lacks any academic or critical discussion.

This article discusses these events, paying close attention to their specificity, and it is anchored in the paradigm of the ropedancer and its representative cultural role. I will start with a theoretical discourse that offers interwoven perspectives on the movement praxis and the dialectical role of the ropedancer, before shifting my analysis to Petit's walks in New York City and Jerusalem. These events have been selectively chosen because of their oppositional and interrelated nature. The guerrilla walk in the World Trade Center is the moment of emergence of Petit's well-known praxis and a constitutive cultural event that has been extensively represented and interpreted. On the other hand, the solemn sponsored walk in Jerusalem is a historical landmark—to which the New York walk has become a reference point. Its critical discussion allows for the deepening of the issue of the agency of the ropedancer in a geopolitically charged context. To discuss and analyze these walks, I rely on video and photographic documentation, theoretical discourse concerning the New York walk, and, to a certain extent, my memory as a spectator in Jerusalem.

The tightrope dancer's practice fits a debatable generic definition of choreography as an “organization of movement in time and space” (Cvejić 2015, 7–8).<sup>1</sup> This performer walks, shapes, and controls body movements with increased risk, coordinates between limbs, and transfers weight in an elevated and limited position. This art includes the central factor of equilibrium that requires a

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dramaturgy punctuated by pausing gestures, intensifying the tension between a planned movement and the potential for total disintegration of the composition.

Petit reinvented this practice and reframed the popular art of acrobatics in the public space. He burst into public consciousness in New York a few years after Trisha Brown first began making works on buildings in public space in New York's SoHo in the early 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Still, Petit does this without a disciplinary association with dance that has broken its institutional boundaries. The tight-rope walker's relevance—as a dancer of his kind, performer-artist, and acrobat—to the discourse of dance and choreography evokes “the emancipatory urge to expand the notion of choreography” (Cvejić 2015, 8). Accordingly, one can accept that choreography allows contemporary trans-disciplinary research and “can now be seen to invoke, recuperate and incorporate other forms of cultural practice” (Allsopp and Lepecki 2008, 4).

This open perception is essential not only to associate tightrope walking with choreography but to break through its cultural limitation to popular spectacle. Petit's performances fascinated and profoundly moved numerous people who etched the sight in their memory—as can be testified by my own experience in Jerusalem. The emotional impact joins the importance derived from the significant creation of an image in motion that embodies an existential journey touching upon the ability to transcend, just as much as it has a contextualized, political value on-site. The ropedancer, therefore, has a role; this art and practice constitute an agency.

In a basic sense, a human agency (deriving from the Latin verb *agere*—to do, to act) is here in action, taking action, and producing an effect. Through a wider social lens that I will apply to the ropedancer, an actor (or *actant*) may be the conductor of a mediating agency that puts into play symbolic meanings. This agency is not limited to the effort to transform reality and affect history through a purposeful role, but is rather derived from the metaphorical interpretation of an action. In the ropedancer's case, the skilled praxis itself is part of this agentive function.<sup>3</sup> The high level of training and discipline, allowing a total balance of the body on the precipice and moving over the abyss on a narrow rope, raises a dilemma. One may understand the ropedancer's human position as socially and politically disciplined or regulated by ruling powers and subjected to the city's history and planned order. At the same time, this performer embodies the capacity and drive to rise above the politics of place, take a risk, and challenge normative behaviors and regularities. In this respect, the ropedancer generates a creative manipulation that critically reframes superimposed narratives while disrupting the historical and actual flow of time. In this fundamental ambiguity resides what I explain as an unsettling agency—that of the cultural paradigm of the ropedancer, which is my framework for re-exploring Petit and discussing his walks in New York and Jerusalem.

In focusing on these walks, how does the ropedancer's act engage the sociopolitical narratives of specific sites? How does the ropedancer balance these high-wire walks' aesthetic and kinesthetic impact with their affective and geopolitical impact? After the New York walk, Petit's performances gained and accumulated almost an archetypal quality that has sustained the importance of the Jerusalem walk and its relevance to the here and now of sociopolitical life. Unlike his trespass in New York, in Jerusalem, Petit embodied the formal political, national, and municipal policies for connecting parts of the city. The walk celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the unification of Jerusalem. It took place twenty years after the Israeli occupation and the erasure of the Green Line border—the armistice drawn at the end of the 1948 war that, in the Jerusalem area, separated Israel and Jordan until 1967. Nevertheless, even in the affirmative context of Jerusalem, the high-wire act enables a dual perspective and generates what I term an abyssal gap between reiterating the border through the image of bridging and the sociopolitical conditions of an intensely contested zone.

By projecting itself upon the present, this disturbing gap remains relevant to the complexities of Jerusalem's reality and its multifarious conceptions. In Jerusalem, one event that reiterated the gesture of connecting the parts of the city (Gurevitch 2019, 14) can nowadays be reinterpreted as the

intertemporal embodiment of crucial liminalities: that between a unifying national force and the endless violent friction among cultural “others”; and that between life in a democratic liberal space that has religious roots and the ethnocratic and authoritarian ideologies that aspire to dominate that space.

By the phrase “abyssal choreography” in the title of this article, I intend to emphasize, first of all, the extraordinary physical condition of the walker on a horizontal axis at a high altitude, above a vertical depth. Abyssal choreography is a movement performed with maximum control of body and space on the verge of potentially losing balance. The spatial concept of the abyss is part of this bodily condition. In Jerusalem, the abyss is related to the Valley of Hinnom, which points to *Gehenna*, indicating hell (*ge’he’nom* in Hebrew), and refers to human sacrifice and biblical prophecies of destruction.<sup>4</sup> The theological connotations strengthen the connection between the mythical and the political: in New York, Jerusalem, or elsewhere, the ropedancer’s self-risking act indicates—from a position of extreme control—the potential for danger, violence, accident, pain, or destruction arising at a socially and ideologically shaped space, certainly when it is a conflictual one.

The abyss is not just a topography but a place whose depth is immeasurable, reminiscent of Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*, whose darkness suggests the absence of a fixed bottom.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the ropedancer’s walk is abyssal since it eludes the fixity of positions and specific temporalities. The ropedancer is an independent agent, a medium, or a messenger at a distance who does not take sides and unsettlingly oscillates between them. The performance of the ropedancer—then, now, and everywhere—essentially entails the movement between what appears to be a disciplined affirmation and a radical challenge to the ideologies inherent in a space or transcendence beyond them.

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Photo 1: Philippe Petit at the Israel Festival, Jerusalem, May 18, 1987 (Associated Press).



## The Ropedancer’s Agency

The ropedancer’s presence in philosophical discourse constitutes a significant framework for understanding this role and its unique relation to the city’s spatial context and the notion of the abyss. At the beginning of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* ([1883–1885] 2006),

Zarathustra arrives at a city located on the verge of the forest and sees a crowd gathered to view a performance by a ropedancer (*Seiltänzer*). Zarathustra turns to the crowd awaiting the performance:

Mankind is a rope fastened between animal and overman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous crossing, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking back, a dangerous shuddering and standing-still: what is lovable about human beings is that they are a *crossing over* and a *crossing under*. (Nietzsche [1883–1885] 2006, 7)

In this metaphorical rhetoric, the ropedancer is an agent of human existence. His act does not consciously intend to change or preserve social structures. However, it is consistent with the understanding of agency as the representation of an inclusive idea embodied in physical action, affective for whoever experiences and interprets it.<sup>6</sup>

This singular popular performance in public space is the metonymic instigator of Zarathustra's pedagogical goal of engaging his addressees (despite being faced with total disinterest):

I teach you the overman. Human being is something that must be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? (Nietzsche [1883–1885] 2006, 5)

Thus, the ropedancer's representative action is a universal embodiment of the human life journey—a call for humans to aspire to rise above their weaknesses and limiting beliefs. As an agent of a transitory state that might last a lifetime, the ropedancer and the rope belong to the same liminal constellation of bridging and crossing. The Nietzschean emphasis on the danger of crossing over an "abyss" (rather than over a street or a square) evokes the close kinesthetic relation between the control needed to balance one's body on a narrow cable and the risky presence of space whose absolute depth has no limit and is the locus of lack of control.

It is important to anchor Zarathustra's call to understand the art of tightrope walking as choreography and a kind of dance. Primarily, the appellation "ropedancer" emphasizes the physical element that must be overcome and the biological dimension that should be developed along with one's spiritual evolution. Additionally, the performance of strict bodily self-control and shaped movement that constitutes an aesthetic experience is the added value of corporeal existence. The telos of this Nietzschean performer is indeed the aspiration for elevated self-improvement and overcoming human nature (so long as we do not relate this notion to one historical racist reading manifested in supremacy, apartheid, discrimination, or segregation).<sup>7</sup> Still, the transgressive move may define the ropedancer as a double agent who moves between the subjection to dictates and models and the over-human (*Übermensch*) who transcends them.

A description of the performance itself follows Zarathustra's words to the expectant crowd, embodying the metaphor of the ropedancer that has already been rhetorically instated. Paraphrasing Nietzsche's detailed street scene description, which emphasizes a set of dualities, the performer emerged from a small door and began walking on a rope stretched between two towers. "Just as he was at the midpoint of his way, the little door opened once again, and a colorful fellow resembling a jester leaped forth and hurried after the first man with quick steps" (Nietzsche [1883–1885] 2006, 11). The second performer ridiculed the first's slowness, surprised him by jumping over him, and defeated him with his skill. In response, the first performer "threw away his pole and plunged into the depths even faster than his pole, like a whirlwind of arms and legs" (11). In the arms of Zarathustra, after falling into the marketplace, the dying performer reaches his *anagnorisis*: "I am not much more than an animal that has been taught to dance by blows and little treats" (11).

The duality of being in between two towers is thus joined by two movement vectors (horizontal walk and vertical fall) and by two types of ropedancers: the one performer's skill is a result of

taming or regimentation, and his movement eventually ends with falling into the town square, into a crowd characterized by animallike ignorance. In contrast, the training of the second performer yields the persona of the jester or provocative trickster—unexpected, creative, innovative, trespassing the limits of the other, pushing him out, and remaining on the tightrope.

After Zarathustra experiences many wanderings, these types resonate within his question that ponders the human condition, appearing in the words (opening the third part of the book): “Who among you can laugh and be elevated at the same time?” (118). By relating this question to the comic figure of the jester, one might ask if and how elevation is equal to creativity and trickery. One may push even further and see the two types of ropedancers—the tame and the trickster—as a split character, or two interdependent facets of a single one, which together constitute the ropedancer’s agency. We can thus continue to ask how they exist simultaneously.

About one hundred years after *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the metaphorical rhetoric of the ropedancer returns in Michel de Certeau’s urbanist discourse in *Practice of Everyday Life* ([1980] 1984), as he regards how Kant distinguishes magicians and charlatans who rely on knowledge and need only know the right trick, from tightrope dancers (*Seiltänzer*) who depend on art:

Dancing on a tightrope requires that one maintain *an equilibrium* from one moment to the next by recreating it at every step by means of new adjustments; it requires one to maintain a balance that is never permanently acquired, constant readjustment renews the balance while giving the impression of “keeping” it. (de Certeau 1984, 73)

Similar to Nietzsche, the ropedancer’s choreographic praxis—maintaining his balance at every step anew—represents a generalized idea, and his creative, adjustable, and innovative elasticity is reminiscent of the manipulative jester. Another similarity is that meticulous training is not necessarily a praxis of taming, but rather a prerequisite for a manipulative stance. As de Certeau writes, narrated history that creates a fictional space “is itself an *act* of tightrope-walking, a balancing act in which the circumstances (place, time) and the speaker himself participate, a way of knowing how to manipulate, dispose, and ‘place’ a saying by altering a set—in short, ‘a matter of tact’” (de Certeau 1984, 79). Hence, the act of telling a story is compared to choreography, the body “writing” in movement to an act of a manipulative tightrope walking.<sup>8</sup>

However, de Certeau also brings walking down to the ground and gives it a critical agency.<sup>9</sup> In his urban discourse, especially in the influential section “Walking in the City,” the equivalence of choreography and narration is valid for the physical-spatial half of that equation as well. A down-to-earth walk is a speech act whose paths and practices are “walking rhetorics” (100) equivalent to verbal narratives: “The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to statements uttered” (97). When “the long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations” (101), it generates in the city tactics that can create alternative and confrontational stories and, in its regulated and limiting strategies, raise “shadows and ambiguities” (101). Thus, the walker and the walk together become an agency. This operational factor serves as a metaphorical mediator of the city’s story and recreates and reframes it through tactical movement in space.

Although the image of the ropedancer is not directly present in “Walking in the City,” it is implied in the known panoramic standpoint from which de Certeau refers to walking—the point of view of the observer from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center towers, perhaps inspired by Petit:<sup>10</sup> “To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city’s grasp” (92). Elevation, then, is not “possessed,” neither “player nor played” by the bustle of New York traffic, and “leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators” (92). If one relates this insight to the high-wire walking between the towers six years before de Certeau’s distinction, the dichotomy between voyeurs and walkers is stirred. With it, the strict distinction between the creativity associated with elevated movement and walking in the city or

falling into it is blurred. For the one who walks the high wire and has the overview can, or must, generate the creativity that characterizes tactical walking in urban labyrinths. The high walker, too, may be attributed to the phatic function that de Certeau adopts from Roman Jakobson—a function expressed in tactile perception and a kinetic appropriation of space.

In de Certeau's writing, the acrobatic rope dance—linked in its Greek origin with *akros* (high) and *bat* (walking)—is also replaced by the mythical metaphor of Icarus: “An Icarus flying above the waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below” (92). His main focus is not Icarus's aspiration to transcend human limitations, reminiscent of the Nietzschean over-human, but rather the ability to take a distant position that may create the fiction of knowledge and, through it, tell the story of the city. De Certeau goes on to ask: “Must one finally fall back into the dark space where crowds move back and forth?” (92). His answer to this question is affirmative but ambivalent: the scopic position is necessary for creating a story, but in order to tell the story that undermines the planned and regulated composition of the city, one must perform the abyssal fall and return to the “pedestrian speech act” (97). If so, the role of the ropedancer as an elevated walker contains both the one who overviews the city and tells its story from above and the rhetorical tactician who walks in the streets.

This philosophical framework evokes the ropedancer's dual role, mainly the tension between the tame and the manipulative. In de Certeau's political urban shift, the emphasis is on the critical function of walking. However, the story written/danced by the high-wire walker confronts and merges the elevated movement with the tactical walking in the city. How is this complex agency linked with Petit? His iconic—not to say fetishized—action in New York is a performative and discursive context vital to this question and the following focuses on the Jerusalem walk.

## Supreme, the Apex of Excitement

In the live-streaming encounter of Slavoj Žižek with Philippe Petit on December 3, 2018, at the New York Public Library, Žižek commented about the World Trade Center walk of August 7, 1974:

There are a couple of ways that we can retain what you usually refer to as contact with the absolute... I claim that what he [Petit] did is a spiritual experience. It is not just physical daring and so on... you almost entered another dimension. (Žižek and Petit 2018)

Entering what Žižek calls “another dimension” is possible when the human body surpasses its ability and transcends the city's usual phenomenology and mundane existence. However, site specificity remains part of this performative constellation. Petit performed a street spectacle, not in a nameless town on the verge of the forest as in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, but in a significant site with iconic visibility. Since then, it has been identified for years with the tremendous trauma of 9/11 and the devastation engraved at Ground Zero.

Along with the spatial specificity, Petit's singularity also affects our understanding of the act and its agency. His total immersion in training and planned operation serves his trespassing, and supports unique, daring, and creative improvisation. It is also possible to wonder if his identity, as a white European man, in congruence with the professional ropedancer's cultural and philosophical significance, stereotypically strengthens the ability to attribute a role to him.<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, the emphasis can be put on his European-French foreignness, which may be related to the site's reclamation and his ability to give it a new perspective.

The talk held by Žižek and Petit repeatedly emphasizes Petit's singularity by figuring the extraordinary moment as dependent on his lengthy and uncompromising perseverant practice. As Žižek (2018) notes, “This moment of eternity is sustained by hard material work.” As Petit, born in

1949, describes it, he had trained since he was six years old and, at the age of seventy (at the time of their conversation), was still training three hours a day. In his walks, he also functioned as a self-made engineer, supervising the construction and, at times, manually going over every single millimeter of the wire before the walk. The walk in New York was implemented with his partners or accomplices after complex logistical preparations and an unauthorized infiltration to the scene.<sup>12</sup> After months of preparation, he performed an act lasting about forty-five minutes, in which he improvised eight crossings between the towers while losing his sense of time and stepping into the territory of birds. Echoing the unexpected manipulations of the ropedancer figure, Petit exceeds anything a dedicated trainee could achieve—such as his trickster-like ability to create a wonderful image when stabilizing a cup on his nose at the police station to which he was led after his New York walk.<sup>13</sup>

Petit (2018) describes his suspended transition to the first step: “I had to make a decision of shifting my weight from a foot anchored in the building to a foot anchored in the wire.” Considerably similar to the inventive skill that de Certeau attributes to the shift of weight from step to step to form a story, Petit also emphasizes the reinvention of every single step: “You should reinvent it as if it is something improvised as if it is a grace of Gods who gave you for a little ephemeral moment the power to walk in the sky.” Along with his humble human awareness (mentioning how difficult he had found it to apply this characteristic), crucial for avoiding death, he emphasizes: “Nothing can happen to me—before I do the first step on the wire I am certain of making a victorious last step.” This position creates a sense of immunity to risk, reflected in Petit’s statement “I don’t know what is falling,” whereas Žižek describes this position as “absolute certainty.”<sup>14</sup>

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Photo 2: Philippe Petit and Slavoj Žižek: Act of Courage | LIVE from the NYPL. December 3, 2018. (Vimeo).



When guerrilla circumstances meet the site specificity of the World Trade Center and the city, understanding the act as political depends upon its categorization as a counter-movement to what had the potential to become the most capitalist site on the earth when it was first built. In the dialectical mirror image of this interpretation, the ropedancer’s agency is also expressed to the opposite effect since the act may be interpreted as idolizing the symbol of global imperial trade and establishing the metonymic state of capitalist architecture. In Žižek’s less delicate words (2018), “stupid leftist, pseudo-leftist, attack you that your spectacle just serves the financial capital, that you didn’t really do anything subversive.” However, Petit’s agency—and perhaps double agency—in New York should not be reduced to the mere dichotomy of capitalist imagery and

its opposite. Although the act stimulates the association with grand narratives and ideologies embedded on-site, it can be seen as transcending beyond them. In this sense, entering the “other dimension” is inseparable from the political role of the trickster. Even decades later, Petit says of himself in his talk with Žižek (2018): “I am a professional interruptor.”

In this respect, in the New York walk, Petit clearly embodied the choreopolitical, which André Lepecki defines as “emerging at the edges between open creativity, daring initiative, and a persistent—even stubborn—iteration of the desire to live away from policed conformity” (Lepecki 2013, 23). Lepecki clarifies that the use of the term “devotion” to describe the dancer’s task is not a theological diagnosis. Rather, “with the performance of devotion, the choreographic reveals itself to be that which produces an agent, that which produces an effect, and that which reminds us that the political, in order to come into the world, requires commitment, engagement, persistence, insistence, and daring” (25). Even when the theological connotation of devotion is not the point, the devoted political act of the ropedancer is elevated above prevailing orders, turning them into extraordinary creativity. As Lepecki notes, “It is through this word—devotion—that the question of moving politically is radically reframed from within choreography” (25).

In Lepecki’s terms, the policemen charged with capturing Petit and waiting for him as he moved out of their reach were, literally, in the position of the choreopolic. Unlike the choreopolitical, which offers the detour and the alternative, they were placed in charge of policing movement and maintaining the existing order (without being aware that they were also a part of public choreography). Most ironically, the policeman’s point of view is that which tangibly connects the choreographic practice with the creative trespassing and touches on the spiritual and sublime impact of the other dimension. In Chris Kelley’s story on CBS News on the day of the event, Sergeant Charles Daniels of the New York City Police Department became the occasional dance critic:

He was bouncing up and down, his feet were actually leaving the wire, and then he would resettle back on the wire again, and then he would go down on one knee, and he had balanced his hand pole, and laid on his back and put his hands behind his neck, and just completely relaxed swings one of his legs over the wire in a care-free manner. (Kelley 1974)

When the sergeant was asked “to rate” the spectacle, he answered: “Supreme, the apex of excitement” (Kelley 1974). The elevated movement—which contains the political trickery of walking the city’s labyrinths—is perceived as a sublime moment by those in charge of limiting it.

In his talk with Petit, Žižek (Žižek and Petit 2018) also notes that the act shifts away from practicality: “His act of taking the Twin Towers, the symbol of financial capital whatever, and the use of it as a background of a great work of art, was a much more radical subversive gesture, . . . subversive because it doesn’t serve anything.” As a part of the ropedancer’s dialectical agency, his distant elevated position expresses and exposes the fictionalization of the city by negating the function that defines it. The radicalness of the act is the aesthetic erasure of the economic function of the flow of trades, and thus their voiding—a void that Petit describes not as an absence but as an alternative material: “What attracted me was not the towers, but the space. . . , void sustains me.”

In her article on Petit, Gwyneth Shanks links the void between the towers and walking “in the air” to the idea of groundlessness. Through it, Shanks places Petit’s politico-aesthetic act within a critical framework pointed at urban planning, “arguing that the groundlessness of Petit’s high-wire walk serves as a critical metaphor for the city’s larger economic landscape in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s” (Shanks 2016, 44). According to her, a central point in the tension between the grounded and groundlessness is that the act foregrounds the financial instability expressed in the construction taking place in Lower Manhattan, which was intensely obvious in the abandoned



Battery Park city landfill over which Petit performed his walk. This view of the city's socio-economic groundlessness in the 1960s and 1970s is possible retroactively, after the walk turned into a point of reference beyond time. This moment directs one to the prominent gap between the city's financial architecture and its everyday life practice, including the reality of neglect.

Photo 3: A report on Philippe Petit's walk and capture, *The New York Times*, August 8, 1974.

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THE NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, AUGUST 8, 1974

## Stuntman, Eluding Guards, Walks a Tightrope Between Trade Center Towers

By GRACE LICHTENSTEIN

Combining the cunning of a second-story man with the nerve of an Evel Knievel, a French high-wire artist evaded past guards at the World Trade Center, ran a cable between the tops of its twin towers and tightrope-walked across it yesterday morning.

Hundreds of spectators created a traffic jam shortly after 7:15 A.M. in the streets 1,350 feet below as they watched the black-clad figure outlined against the gray morning sky tipping back and forth across the meticulously rigged 131-foot cable.

Finally, after perhaps 45 minutes of knee bends and other stunts, Philippe Petit, balancing pole in hand, turned himself over to waiting policemen.

"If I see three oranges, I have to juggle. And if I see two towers, I have to walk," the professional stuntman explained afterward in heavily accented English, punctuating his sentences with a Gallic "bon."

Mr. Petit was arrested by policemen of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and booked for disorderly conduct and criminal trespass.

But his performing days in New York apparently are not over. Late yesterday afternoon the slight, blond man, wearing black ballet shoes, was released from custody at the direction of Richard M. Kohn, the Manhattan District Attorney.

**Free Performance Due**

Mr. Kohn, with the consultation of Parks Commissioner Edwin West Jr., made a deal with Mr. Petit to drop the charges in exchange for a free performance.

The men laid guy lines from the cable to the roof to minimize swaying. At one end the cable was wound around a steel stanchion on the roof. At the other, a winch was set up to regulate the tension.

Mr. Petit said he had hesitated about taking the initial leap because there was a scaffolding look at the people and that was fantastic," Mr. Petit said.

As he was led away, street level spectators booed the police.

At a news conference in the Criminal Court Building, Mr. Petit announced the impending dismissal of charges and suggested that security by the Port Authority, which runs the World Trade Center, was not as "keen" as it should be.

Mr. Petit happily signed autographs for a policeman, scribbling his name alongside a drawing of the two towers like to cross the falls but, who no ambitions." But, when asked,

Mr. Petit was examined at hospital and later freed




Associated Press

The New York Times/Neil Roid

The still-acts Petit performed on the high wire and the still photos that froze the movement helps this moment generate meta-historical reflection.<sup>15</sup> After the New York image was established as “supreme” and accumulated cultural visibility, it could now return to history and reframe it. As shown in Chloe Johnston’s article regarding Petit’s New York walk through its reception, Petit’s walk “invites us to project ourselves into it and practice this space, now gone, in the air between the Twin Towers, that we might re-write history” (2013, 31). This receptionist point of view contains the act’s visual, cinematic, and literary mythologization. The viewers, not necessarily on-site, also react to the astounding physical risk. “This risk inspires an imagined kinaesthesia—a phenomenological response to an event that a spectator does not witness—that allows the secondary audience to project themselves into the story and share in the triumph” (Johnston 2013, 30).<sup>16</sup> This effect can be related both to the walk and to its retroactive connection to 9/11. As Johnston writes, “In part because of the tragedy of the Towers’ destruction, the performance seems to have leapt beyond its temporal limits as well, getting re-performed in our psyche in new ways as the space has changed” (34).

The moment etched in memory could, then, constitute an intertemporal perspective on the socio-political interrelations winding among events, crises, and power relations. In Žižek’s (Žižek and Petit 2018) words, one image, in which an airplane flies above Petit, seems to tell us, “Hello guys, see you on 9/11.” One is led to draw a troubling line between Petit’s abyssal choreography and the horrific 9/11 falls, some of which even involved a degree of choice and control. They are mainly recalled through the shocking photos by Richard Drew (from AP) that turned the falling people into a frozen moment, especially the image of a man falling from the northern tower, published on September 12, 2001, on the cover of the *New York Times*.<sup>17</sup>

In *Singularities*, Lepecki coins the expression “choreographic angelology,” which is based on Walter Benjamin’s image of the angel of history:

In temporal economy that governs angelic servility, ephemerality does not refer to events that pass in time. Nor does it refer to the vanishing of a present performance into the past. Neither is ephemerality about the declension of a work from actuality into memory. In the angelology of servility, ephemerality’s aftermath is not even a memory of what has just happened. It is, rather, ahistorical. (Lepecki 2016, 148)

Like the grounded or groundless drifting angel, the elevated human ropedancer fulfills an angelic mission of sorts. The supreme positioning of the high-wire walker is ahistorical, not because it is outside of history, but because of the possibility of seeing events through intertemporal links, especially those that generate ruins. Nevertheless, such a characteristic derives from the corporeal act in its time and place. One could proceed to associate Petit’s New York walk with the following critical events or historical loops. Among them are the moments documented in Afghanistan during the American forces’ withdrawal and the country’s swift occupation by the Taliban in August 2021—the imperialist sight of locals in Kabul seeking rescue, climbing onto American military aircraft, and dropping off.

Reflections on the evocative walk in 1974 and its agency continue to develop but have mainly been limited to New York. This eternal moment evolved when Petit’s activity continued with a new and widely publicized status under vastly different circumstances. It should be noted that he has probably preserved his consistently ambivalent attitude, which has included the rejection of tempting financial offers to lead demonstration workshops of pedagogical value. At the same time, he implemented numerous performances marking the launch of historical and national places and anniversaries at emblematic sites, some of them giant productions with audiences of tens or hundreds of thousands.<sup>18</sup>

The discourse about the New York walk associates the ropedancer’s agency with a context in which Petit’s position is that of the trickster. His devoted and even disciplined training is manifested in choreopolitical trespassing—although it can be seen, reversely, as iconographic empowerment of the financial landscape. Furthermore, understanding this walk as touching upon another dimension reinforces its perception as a tactical move beyond the utilitarian city sphere while materializing the void or lack and its presence in the city. This walk is a moment that evokes intertemporal cords linking Petit’s performative presence over the urban abyss and the crises and ruins it signals.

How does a city-dependent performance—under circumstances of invitation, different from those in New York—affect the understanding of the ropedancer’s agency? I shall focus on this question regarding the Jerusalem walk.

## **Abyssal Choreography in Jerusalem**

Petit’s walk *Bridge for Peace*, on May 18, 1987, at 6:00 p.m., opened the annual Israel Festival Jerusalem (then curated by the theater actor and director Oded Kotler) and took place above the Valley of Hinnom. Dressed in a clown-like, white costume of puffed trousers with colorful stripes, Petit walked from the west side of the city to the east and mostly Arab part of the city, which had been united under Israeli sovereignty since 1967—from the rooftop of Mount Zion Hotel to the American Institute of Holy Land Studies on Mount Zion.<sup>19</sup>

The Jerusalem event, too, reaffirmed the ropedancer’s dualities. Petit used his skilled praxis based on strenuous training to create lofty, creative movement; like the representative status attributed to the ropedancer by Nietzsche, his affective, singular physical action explicitly embodied a

transcending idea—the goal of inclusive peace. However, on another level, the historical and geopolitical conditions in which the event took place are crucial for the understanding of its site specificity and thus congruous with Mike Pearson’s observation that the site’s “social, cultural, political, geographical, architectural and linguistic aspects of context may inform or prescribe the structure and content of performance” (Pearson 2010, 143). In this case, importance is attributed to the specificity of the walking path that encounters spatial conditions and bodily motion. In site-specific discourse, this varied performative mode has gained several names, among them “journey performance” (Smith 2019, 35–52) and different variations of mobility (Pearson 2010, 40–42; Wilkie 2012).

The dependence of performance on moving in a spatial context raises issues connected with the right to the city all the more forcefully, reminiscent of the questions raised by Bertie Ferdman:

What narrative of “urban” is being performed? What city is either desired or produced through such performances? What communities, regardless of geographical specificity, are present, or silenced? (Ferdman 2018, 115)

In view of this, perhaps Petit—with worthy and positive intentions—was a kind of captive policy agent, approaching the tame figure vanquished by the jester in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*? Is there, perhaps, an unbridgeable gap between his movement and survey of Jerusalem, his telling an official story, and the “pedestrian speech acts” (de Certeau 1984, 97) that tell a different story? Indeed, this affirmative agency—whose attribution to Petit is criticized by Žižek (Žižek and Petit 2018)—can be much more convincingly related to the act in Jerusalem than seeing him as a representative of the grand narrative of financial New York. However, a dialectical understanding of the ropedancer’s role is also valid in Jerusalem. Even through the visionary spectacle of the united city, “shadows and ambiguities” arise (de Certeau 1984, 101).

The story of occupation or liberation can be told without the ropedancer. Nevertheless, since the act was embedded in the Jerusalem borderland, Petit’s unsettling performative agency came into play and remains relevant. On the one hand, the socio-economic context of the World Trade Center walk and the unauthorized circumstances have been replaced, in Jerusalem, by a formal policy under a sponsored and solemn festival. On the other hand, a political-critical agency can be found in the ropedancer’s aesthetic intensification of the united city’s story as a spatial fictionalization. Along with it, the ropedancer activates an intertemporal “angelology” that invites multiple perspectives and contextualizations, and even resonates with the Valley of Hinnom’s biblical charge of suffering and destruction. These aspects are interwoven into Petit’s walk, while the gap between the “tame” agent and the manipulative trickster remains.

After the 1948 war—the Israeli War of Independence and the Palestinian Nakba (the disaster, in Palestinian terminology)—between the armistice agreements in 1949 and the 1967 Six Days War and the Palestinian Naksa (the loss, in Palestinian terminology), the Valley of Hinnom was included in the area of the Green Line border. It was caged inside a no-man’s-land between the Jordanian and Israeli armistice lines. Every performative walking track can be seen as an embodiment of a border, marked as a line in motion or produced while crossing lines and separations. Artistic performance in motion can thus also expose the performative production of sovereign borders that delineate or exclude territories of identity and belonging. As Merav Amir explains, just as gender is created as a performative iteration of the subject, “the governmental apparatus activates practices of border creation, which, in actuality, construct the sovereign subject” (Amir 2010, 34).

In Petit’s Jerusalem walk, the performative mechanism of bordering activated the act of erasing the Green Line by embodying what had become the Seam Line zone. In constellation with the wire, the ropedancer’s own moving body reenacted the production of a “seam” or “stitch.” Although *via*

*negativa*, this walking rhetoric is an act of remembering the divided city, which is embedded in communal stories and personal biographies—including my own, as I grew up in Jerusalem in the Seam Line zone, in the “mixed” Arab and Jewish neighborhood of Abu Tor, facing the Valley of Hinnom.<sup>20</sup> The choreographic act of “seaming” can also be seen as an evocation of the continuous need, on the verge of a constant menace, to perform the sovereign gesture of unification while spectacularly highlighting its fictionality or seeming.<sup>21</sup>

Amidst the abundant discussion of Israel’s geopolitical conflict, it is critical to emphasize what directly concerns Petit’s walk and has both historical import and actual relevance. From the national and mostly consensual Israeli perspective relevant to this day, Petit’s choreographic reenactment of the Seam Line, marking twenty years since the occupation and annexation of East Jerusalem, is an act of unification; at the same time, it rejects any possibility of re-separation in the case of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. In current Israeli public polemics, the discourse concerning the Green Line ranges from rejection and denial to attempts to emphasize its political existence, at least by those who belong to the political left and in pedagogical contexts.<sup>22</sup>

In the performance, the path led to Mount Zion (which from 1948 to 1967 remained a Jewish enclave), where sites sacred to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are concentrated, and outlined the vector leading to the ultimate patrimonium—the Temple Mount and the Western (Wailing) Wall, in the most conflictual complex, where the Al-Aqsa Mosque is located. In Jerusalem, the political value that can be attributed to “another dimension” is related to the granting of an eternal unification by its mythical ethos as the ancient holy city. Petit’s horizontal movement, across the cord stretched between primordial biblical land and celestial space, resembles a dot in the sky marking the *axis mundi*, which according to Mircea Eliade constitutes the sacred city or the temple “regarded as the meeting point between heaven, earth, and hell” ([1949] 1959, 12).

From a contrarian perspective, the erasure of the Green Line reconstitutes an apparently transparent internal border that outlines the apparatuses “rendering the lives of Palestinians in East Jerusalem on the verge of becoming ‘bare lives’” (Amir 2010, 47). About 95 percent of East Jerusalem’s inhabitants, including in the Old City, are not Israeli citizens, having the status of permanent residents, subject to control, in many cases living in conditions of neglect, and deprived of the right to vote for the Knesset (the Israeli parliament). The erasure of the border is acute for the Palestinian village of Silwan (officially a neighborhood), subject to a continuous struggle over the Judaizing procedures there.<sup>23</sup> Because of the proximity to the Valley of Hinnom and the impact of the grand spectacle, and before the settler activity in Silwan was established and intensified during the 2000s, many of its residents (I recall mainly children) were present in Petit’s performance, gathering primarily on the eastern side.

The line connected and “told” by the ropedancer is part of the Green Line complexity but differs from the erased Green Line border that marks the limits of sovereignty (in a particularly controversial formulation) between Israel and the occupied territories. However, both the municipal area of Jerusalem and the non-annexed areas beyond the line do not have fixed and agreed-upon international borders. The boundary of eastern Jerusalem can be called the “border of indeterminacy” (Amir 2011). Respectively, areas of the West Bank (Judea and Samaria, in Israeli terminology) can all be defined as “imaginary lines” (Kotef and Amir 2011)—lines that are marked by military presence and technologies of control, including movement restrictions, checkpoints, and the Separation Barrier (built in 2002, following the Second Intifada, “the uprising,” over vast parts of the Green Line regions).

In contrast to this sphere of restrictions and control, Petit’s performance signals the right to movement. Although the ropedancer’s extreme self-control is practiced upon a limited narrow wire, it took place during the celebration of freedom of movement in a public space, at a vast event, amidst the growth of a local neoliberal culture. Seen from above, perhaps the regions where freedom of

movement materializes are blurred with those in which it is denied.<sup>24</sup> In light of this context, the connecting gesture of the ropedancer is not only an expression of unification achieved by erasure but a metonym for the overall border ambiguity, like the abyss that has no end. The fact that the Valley of Hinnom was declared a no-man's-land is a symbolic reinforcement of the uncertain geopolitical and social status of sovereignty and its power limits. The Valley of Hinnom is not a prominent space of increased control but rather an outcome of a transparent sovereign strategy.

At the time of the event *Bridge for Peace*, in May 1987, the state's official policy of the city's unification was already integrated with urban planning. Neighborhoods around the Valley of Hinnom (mixed, Arab and Jewish, abandoned in 1948) had been erased. The Jewish neighborhood Yemin Moshe—above the valley and facing the Old City walls—was evacuated and, in a familiar act of strategic gentrification, turned into an artists' quarter. The neglected no-man's-land was transformed into a public park, and a dense concentration of cultural sites and art institutions had been built and renovated. Petit's festive performance thus joined the founding of what was nicknamed (referring to the then mayor of Jerusalem) "Teddy Kollek's cultural mile," which establishes the sovereign presence in this area to this day.

The motivation to link the performance of unification with the peace narrative, which had framed the event, was more fitting for the public Jewish-Israeli atmosphere at the time—a few years prior to the chances given by the Oslo Accords agreements, before the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995.<sup>25</sup> Since then, the euphemistic and hopeful use of the word "peace" has been increasingly eroded. In the midst of the conflict, and in a time of relative hope, it was probably a moment belonging to a utopian sphere—with a partially diverse audience—six months before the First Intifada that broke out in December 1987.

The volume of the production and its institutionalized nature was clearly shown in the apparatus of the event. In Giorgio Agamben's terms, it is a heterogeneous dispositive that "appears at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge," proving that "apparatus always has a concrete strategic function and is always located in a power relation" (Agamben [2006] 2009, 3). Petit, who functioned as a co-engineer during the preparations, walked for three hundred meters on a steel cable (anchored to the ground at twelve spots), about seventy meters above the ground, without a safety net, for all of nineteen minutes. The grand spectacle—suitable for the fictionalized nature of a grand spectacle—was highlighted through additional means. The walk was accompanied from below by a wind ensemble of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra—playing a concert titled *Cheers to Jerusalem* especially for the occasion. The established apparatus was also present in a VIP balcony, where Israel's Minister of Education Yitzhak Navon (President of the State of Israel from 1978 to 1983) and Jerusalem Mayor Teddy Kollek (a position he had held from 1965 until 1993) were seated.

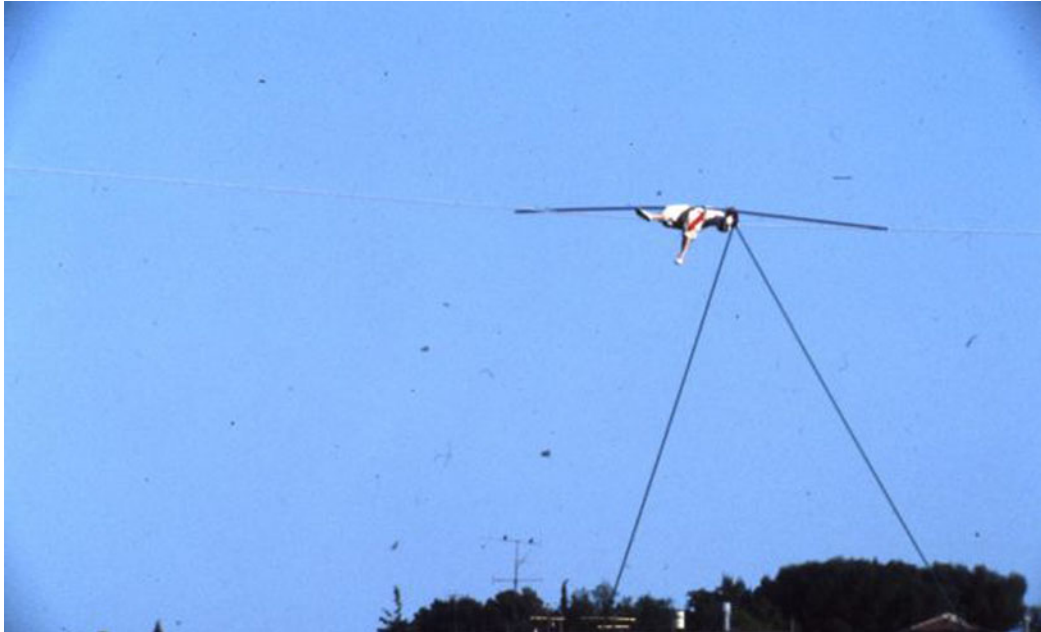
The temporary transformative impact of the event on public space was evident. About thirty thousand people watched the ropedancer from different spots—below the Old City walls, the slopes of Silwan and Mount Zion, the Ottoman Sultan's Pool (renewed as a venue for major cultural events), the Jerusalem Cinematheque located in the valley, the Yemin Moshe neighborhood, and Mishkenot Sha'ananim, now a cultural center and luxurious guest house (a renovated section of the first Jewish settlement project outside the city walls, founded in 1860). Compared to the targeted police forces waiting for Petit in New York, massive police forces made way and blocked central streets in Jerusalem, a fact that created traffic jams throughout the city.

Unlike the news coverage that reported the New York walk and arrest of the trespasser, the event in Jerusalem was broadcast live on Israeli TV's Channel 1 (Peleg 1987)—the only television channel at the time, and free of competition. The broadcast (which has become an archival item) lasted forty-two minutes. It was accompanied in dramatic detail by a Hebrew narrator (Uri Levy) and occasionally passed on to another reporter (Salomon Munir) who spoke in Arabic. Next to the

sign bearing the title of the performance, on a wall of the building where the walk began, a giant billboard was placed specially, advertising the Migdal (tower, in Hebrew) insurance corporation. Besides the irony of such advertising, it points to the event's adherence to the then new local neo-liberal culture and economy.<sup>26</sup>

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Photo 4: Philippe petit, a pausing gesture, Jerusalem, May 18, 1987 (David Harris Collection, The Harvey A. Harris Judaica Book Fund in the Harvard College Library, @Rivka Harris).



Unlike my remote point of view on-site, the broadcast moved between long shots and close-ups of Petit, including his preparation on the rooftop of Mount Zion Hotel. After long anticipation, one could watch close-up shots of Petit taking off the covers of his white shoes, untying his pole, waving it, and taking his first step. Midway on the high wire he stops, lifts his right leg, waves his right hand, and out of his pocket takes a white dove—the emblem of peace and the *Shekhina* (Divine Spirit)—which hovers over his hand, sits on his head, flies off, and returns to the cable.<sup>27</sup> Petit lies down on his back in the sleeping-like pose that is identified with him, emphasized as a feature of Robert Zemeckis's *The Walk* (2015). This gesture is a lengthy still-act, possibly signifying his atemporal freeze in time and intertemporal agency. The still-act also places the situation between absolute nonchalant control and the increased potential of falling, even simulating the moment after. In an especially memorable image that can be viewed on the live broadcast, he continues to walk up the high wire to Mount Zion, and on his way, removes his shoes. This is the last difficult part (creating a Sisyphean connotation but with light-footed grace), as the orchestra produces rising musical tension. The utopian dramaturgy of this combination is presented as an even worthier task due to the unusual physical effort needed, either for the city's unification or to demonstrate its impossibility.

The ropedancer suspends his last step by raising his right foot, and arrives at Mount Zion to the sound of trumpets, ties his pole, and bows to the audience, which responds with rhythmic applause. Then comes another highlight, which turns militant motives into a prominent part of the apparatus: a helicopter approaches the roof, Petit is helped to tie himself to the aircraft and rises in the air, his legs stretched forward. He moves against the background of the Jerusalem landscape and the sky, and farther away toward the Judean desert, while dozens of white balloons are released in the air. Thus, the fictionalized connection between the final achievement of the performer and a

military victory gesture is made. This gesture is very different: not only from the New York ending, when he fell into the hands of the police, but from the context in which Petit and his partners were helped by a helicopter to observe the World Trade Center in their preparation stage.

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*Photo 5: A crowd gathers to watch Philippe Petit, Jerusalem, May 18, 1987 (David Harris Collection, The Harvey A. Harris Judaica Book Fund in the Harvard College Library, ©Rivka Harris).*



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*Photo 6: Philippe Petit rises by a helicopter by the end of the walk, Jerusalem, May 18, 1987 (David Harris Collection, The Harvey A. Harris Judaica Book Fund in the Harvard College Library, ©Rivka Harris).*



From another intertemporal point of view, the military connotation is there in the walking route and the wire—it is precisely the route used by the trolley in 1948 to transport weapons, supplies, and even wounded personnel between St. John Hospital (that turned into the Mount Zion Hotel from which Petit began his walk) to Mount Zion in the opposite direction. The trolley cable remained in functional condition until 1967 and was kept as a military secret until the decision to establish the Cable Car Museum in 1972. The walk along the cable, then, is also a reference and reconstruction of a concrete route linked to the national territorial war. The reiterated connection of the city parts is present in the suspension bridge built in 2023 over the Valley of Hinnom, allowing the public to move precisely along the route that Petit walked. This route is also the focus of a controversy regarding the plan to build a cable car on the route that includes the Valley of Hinnom toward Mount Zion, Silwan village, the City of David archeological site, and the Western Wall. It is presented both as a traffic solution and tourist attraction but is also seen as promoting control and national-territorial supremacy.

In such a complex geopolitical entity, the shadows of ambivalence continue to prevent a unilateral view of Petit as an agent of policy. Like the scenography of New York's financial architecture, the superimposed narrative of the united city is aesthetically framed as a spatial idealization by the ropedancer's crossing act. As in New York, his movement in an aerial line, in the void between the two sides, is valuable in emptying space of its uses. The scopic gaze, as it were, is politically neutral and free of the city's multicultural, national, religious, and ethnic divisions. However, it is also the broad view that exposes the difference between the celestial uniting image and the divisive contested earthy space that is especially present in a borderland zone.

By walking above the volatile earthy space, the ropedancer becomes a nonchronological vector. Like the thread drawn between Petit's New York walk and 9/11, whoever walked above the abyss of Gehenna without a safety net moved toward the First Intifada in 1987, while the control position of the dangerous walk suppresses the risk. Moreover, the walk signals: *Hey, see you in the Second and Third Intifada*; see you again and again on the route leading to the sanctified site, above an immeasurable abyss, amidst violent friction and through the fire that was ignited in the Temple Mount compound and Al Aqsa in the Gaza offensive in May 2021, and the violence and destruction in 2022, in 2023, and so on. The axis created by walking spreads between the theological and the political, and among historical strata and current affairs; between human sacrifices and prophecies of doom in the book of Jeremiah and actual violence and danger; between the Separation Barrier and the movement of crossing the "Bridge to Peace."

Although I was in the audience on May 18, 1987, watching Petit in Jerusalem, I was no less impassioned by the performance *To Hell with Zik*, by the local Zik Group, scheduled an hour after the high-wire event. Founded in 1985 by visual and performing artists, the Zik Group was invited to participate in the Israel Festival for the first time. Since they were not yet publicly known and placed themselves deep inside the Valley of Hinnom, the idea arose to draw spectators to them from Petit's crowded spectacle by a procession. Their show took place immediately after the high-wire performance, headed by two Zik members holding a chain of colorful polystyrene goats—a deliberately reframed orientalist image of the local goatherds of Silwan, who were indeed grazing their goats nearby. The procession led to a substantial wooden construction of a human figure—a *Moloch*, which the group also named the *za-la-me* (Arabic for man, human being). It was erected in front of the audience, flanked on both sides by polystyrene hellhounds. As in other early performances of the Zik Group, they finished by igniting the sculptural objects. Unlike Petit's elevated gesture of unification of the city's two sides, the procession led to the bottom of the valley, not in a crossing movement, and reacted to the "grounded" reality. The structures (the human figure and hellhounds) were referring to the mythical authoritative idol linked to the site's sacrificial narrative and its identity as "hell," thus they did not evoke the notion of peace but pointed to the actual criticality of the Seam Line zone. The action ended with a Nietzschean "overman" ruler or only a human being going to hell in flames. It was a counter-image of the "Bridge to Peace," yet it was also



an uplifting ritualistic moment, when the earthly substance and its differences become a glowing and consuming fire.

## Conclusion

Following the Nietzschean types—the trickster and the tame—the agency of the ropedancer is embodied in the choreographed movement over the abyss in between aspects of human existence. Both aspects demand extremely devoted training that enables control over the risk potentially associated with the act and that is sensed during the walk. Shifting to the urban political discourse of de Certeau, the one who observes the city from above, and is thus able to recount its story, merges—as can be related to the ropedancer—with the rhetorical pedestrianism of the critical tactician in the streets.

To understand the ropedancer's power of action and agency, asking what story this agent can tell, it is also necessary, as I have suggested here, to anchor the paradigmatic performer in specific contexts. The particular and contextual discourse enables the association of the ropedancer's facets that Petit embodies in his unique way with the circumstances and locations of New York and Jerusalem. Despite the apparent difference between a guerrilla initiative and an institutionalized invitation, the affirmative act and the creative manipulation that critically reframes the site are entangled. Subversion in New York becomes more than just trespassing, and an act that takes place under the auspices of a festive invitation in Jerusalem, in which a formal narrative is approved, is not necessarily the opposite.

The agency of the ropedancer in Jerusalem is especially deceptive because Petit carried out and certainly did not refute the story of the unification of the parts of Jerusalem and the erasure of the Green Line border with all the rhetorical devices (among them, the “seaming” movement, the peace imagery, the technological apparatus, and the military motifs). Nevertheless, the act enabled the presence—or the dance—between possibilities for two main reasons: the act highlighted and exposed the city's unification as an ideological fictionalization, and the ropedancer's inherent function is as an “angel” that moves between times and enables the critical connections between them.

In conclusion, I can explain abyssal choreography through several complementary emphases. First, the subversive potential of the elevated tightrope walk, which touches on another dimension or the “supreme,” lies in its power to transcend the socio-economic and geopolitical narratives that remain “down there.” However, as shown by the significant case of Petit, this movement can also empower as well as expose these narratives. Second, the discipline required from this movement practice, and the creativity that is renewed with each step and opens up to improvisation and critical position, are both the facets of the ropedancer. In Petit's actions, this two-sided constellation is indeed a complex: within specific contexts, it expresses the abyssal gap between the critical tactician and an action tied to political control and formal superimpositions. At the same time, the walks indicate that this constellation consists of the fusion and the unresolved fluctuation between positions. The role of the ropedancer is thus an unsettling agency. Finally, the body and its movement on the verge of losing balance activate the tension between increased control and the potential for danger or a constant state of emergency. This potential, as we have come to know in New York and Jerusalem, can be realized in practice. The ropedancer is a vector connecting places, times, and events. Therefore, the ropedancer has the power to reveal the mechanisms of a crisis inherent on-site and signal the existence of an abyss with no end.

## Notes

1. Trisha Brown's building walks include *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* (1970), *Walking on the Wall* (1971), and *Roof Piece* (1971).

2. Bojana Cvejić (2015) presents this definition following an inquiry by the Austrian dance web journal *Corpus Web* in 2011.
3. See Carrie Noland's (2009) analysis of agency through the corporeal performance of gestures that contains, most relevantly, to the ropedancer's role, the emphasis on the challenging potential of cultural embodiment.
4. The sacrifice of children, set on fire for the foreign deity of the *Moloch* or *Molech* (derived from *Melech*, king in Hebrew) upon high places (stages) in the Valley of Hinnom, is mentioned in the book of Jeremiah 7:31.
5. A direct reference to the immeasurable nature of the abyssal *Inferno* is found, for example, in Canto 4: "True it is, that I found myself on the verge of the valley of the woeful abyss that gathers in thunder of infinite wailings. Dark, profound it was, and cloudy, so that though I fixed my sight on the bottom I did not discern anything there" (Smith and Sonzogni 2017, 14).
6. For more theorization on the notion of agency and its social and cultural aspects, see Alfred Gell (1998), emphasizing art objects' social role as indices of human agency; Gell's reassessment (Layton 2003); analyzing the agency of the modern "actor" as a cultural and historical construction (Meyer and Jepperson 2000); reframing agency as a performative process based on a reiteration of a set of social relations (Butler 2010); and re-reading concepts of agency as both human and material dynamics of artworks (Jones 2015).
7. For polemical research that tends to refute the distortions of Nietzsche's concepts, including the *Übermensch*, by the Nazi race theory, see Golomb and Wistrich (2002).
8. Critically discussing the fusion of the terms "movement" and "writing" into "choreography," André Lepecki observes that "writing appears as a dynamic, hyper-kinetic operator that draws from its constitutive mobility its full performative force" (Allsopp and Lepecki 2008, 2). In congruence with de Certeau's interplay between narration and tightrope walking, he asserts: "Movement and writing, fused into one word, have reflected and refracted each other in an endless game of mirrors where each term is a *mise-en abime* of the other" (2). In affinity to the groundlessness of tightrope walking, "writing as movement performs a displacement, a dislodging with profound political consequences: the ungrounding of the author (the choreographer, but also the dancer) as that always self-present, self-conscious, self-identifiable intentionality" (2).
9. It is important to remember that de Certeau's programmatic stance regarding the counterposition of urban walking is made after and under the influence of the Situationist International's drift (*dérive*)—the practice of "psychogeographic" walking that is probably the most influential critical and playful urban variation of flannerism. See the comprehensive discussion of walking as an aesthetic practice in Careri (2002, 88–118).
10. Gwyneth Shanks notes that de Certeau's description—written years after Petit's walk—was made possible because of the public observation deck his feat helped create (2016, 49). Significantly, the overview is thus shaped, as well as retroactively theorized, by the ropedancer's agency.
11. Contrary to this stereotype, Janine Antoni's (2002) performance *Touch* can be placed—a video installation of walking on a tightrope along the "touching" line of the ocean's horizon and the sky. For this purpose, she returned to her childhood home, at Freeport Island in the Bahamas, and performed the walk herself in front of her parents' house. Antoni trained only until achieving sufficient balance and carried out relatively low movement, without a noticeable risk. Unlike the grand narrative of the WTC, the landscape is isolated from any reference, and its contextualization depends on her choice to frame it by her personal story and individual memory. Even so, an extraordinary aesthetic moment of bodily and cosmic balance occurs.
12. Unauthorized actions that preceded the WTC walk took place on June 26, 1971, between the two towers of Notre-Dame de Paris, and on June 3, 1973, between the pylons of Sydney Harbour. Petit prepared and executed the infiltration into the WTC with Jim Moore, Francis Brunn, Jean-Louis Blondeau, and Jean-François Heckel. For a detailed description of the operation, see Shanks (2016, 47); Lewis 2022; Petit's autobiographical perspectives (Petit and Reddy 1975; Petit 1985, 2002); and the documentary film by Marsh (2008).
13. Petit was charged with disorderly conduct and criminal trespass but received the light and socially engaged sentence of giving a free show for children in Central Park.

14. The certainty of not falling is comparable to performative artistic acts that, in contrast, fulfill bodily gravitation and self-risking vulnerability through actual falling—in the 1973 *Jump Piece*, Tehching Hsieh jumped from the second-floor window of his home in Taipei, Taiwan (before he moved to New York); or in Bas Jan Ader's 1970–1975 documented artistic jumps—from a roof, from a tree branch, into the river on a bicycle—which focus on the moment of the physical surrender to the body's fall. For further discussion of artistic falls, starting with Yves Klein's 1960 *Leap into the Void*, see Brezavšč (2013); Ben-Shaul (2022).

15. André Lepecki's discussion of the choreography of suspension invokes anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis's notion of the "still-act" as a disruptive moment that generates a critical reflection and allows political agency (Lepecki 2006, 15–16).

16. Chloe Johnston's emphasis on the spectators' experience of risk is comparable to Josette Féral's observation regarding the risk that the artists voluntarily undergo on stage, whereas the spectators "try to distinguish between what has been planned and controlled and the ever-present possibility of accident" (Féral 2011, 55). When stage risk is present, it is subject to the theatricality that "has never truly disappeared from the process" (55). In the public space as well, spectators are affected by the aesthetic dimension of Petit's action and the ability to frame his action as art.

17. For an ethical and performative discussion of 9/11 images of falling, see Fitzpatrick (2007).

18. Among dozens of Petit's events—in 1986, the reopening of the Statute of Liberty in Lincoln Center, New York; in the same year, a reenactment (made for Imax film) of Charles Blondin's tight-rope walking in 1858 over a gorge below the Niagara Falls; in 1989, a walk from Palais de Chaillot across the Seine River to the second level of the Eiffel Tower, Paris, marking the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution; and in 1994, a walk between the spires of the Frankfurt Cathedral and St. Paul's Church, celebrating the city's 1200th anniversary.

19. For a brief look at the Jerusalem event, see AP Archive (1987).

20. For a narrational and ethnographic approach regarding the divided Jerusalem between the wars (1948–1967), and narrating the occupation in east Jerusalem, see Hercbergs (2018). On the issue of boundaries in Jerusalem and the production and implications of the Green Line border, also see Shlay and Rosen (2010) and Pullan (2013).

21. Another event, echoing Petit's performance without an explicit "stitching" gesture of the parts of the city, can testify to the constant need to validate the connection movement: In 2016, the American acrobat Heather Larsen performed two slackline walks, about thirty meters above the ground, barefoot and connected to a safety harness, between the towers of the Tower of David Museum of the History of Jerusalem. The event was held at the invitation of a group of Israeli tightrope walkers in cooperation with the museum and a commercial company. The museum building, on the west side of the Old City near the Jaffa Gate and above the Valley of Hinnom, is a citadel where the layers of the city (starting with Herod's Towers) accumulated. The museum tells the multicultural story of Jerusalem, while its establishment on the Seam Line in 1989 is part of the cultural hold in East Jerusalem, including the symbolic naming "David." See short documentation in *Telegraph* (2016).

22. See, for example, the actual controversy around the initiative to distribute maps to be hung in classrooms on which the Green Line was demarcated in *Haaretz* (2022).

23. For a broader critical discussion on Silwan through a performative perspective, see Ben-Shaul (2017).

24. Based on Hagar Kotef's observation regarding the neoliberal paradox of movement, especially present concerning deprived migratory and occupied populations: the more movement has become tightly interlaced with freedom, the more "array of technologies and practices had to be put in place so that this movement would become moderated enough (one could say tamed or domesticated)" (Kotef 2015, 2).

25. The Oslo Accords were a series of agreements signed by Israel and the PLO as part of the peace process between Israel and the Palestinian inhabitants of the Occupied Territories.

26. The socio-economic neoliberal shift in Israel can be marked around the turnover of 1977—the right-wing's rise to power in a government headed by Menachem Begin, the defeat of laborism, and the last vestiges of the welfare state model.

27. Following Petit's emphasis on connection and peace, it is worth noting the current work of the Israeli artist Sigalit Landau in the exhibition *The Burning Sea* in 2022–2023, at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, curated by Amitai Mendelsohn. The exhibition consists of works she created over twenty years using salt, mainly from the Dead Sea. It includes the video performance *Across the Divide (Bridge III)* (2022): a performer (a man seen in silhouette from a distance) walks on a tightrope in slow and even steps, at sunrise, along a mountain range in the desert near the Dead Sea. The tightrope walk is a metonymic alternative to Landau's political and environmental proposal to build a bridge between Israel and Jordan. Despite the Jordan-Israel peace treaty, signed on October 26, 1994, such a plan seems more utopian than feasible. The tightrope walk's landscape may be considered "biblical," with no explicit association with geopolitical parties. The projection is a loop (fifteen minutes) in which the ropedancer's body appears on one side of the frame and disappears on the other. The elevated movement between heaven and earth transcends the need to assert ownership over an "other" opposite side or validate an agreement. No less, it leaves in the abyss, in the lowest place in the world, the signs—present in almost every object in the exhibition—of an ecological disaster that is inseparable from the excessive exploitation (from both sides of the sea) of natural resources.

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