

In the air

Man on Wire

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I recently saw James Marsh's 2008 documentary, „Man on Wire“. It tells the story of Philippe Petit, the man who walked a tightrope between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center 35 years ago this August. Petit came to Paris in 1968, aged 19, and was one of the first artists to revive the ancient art of street performance, making the squares and boulevards of Paris places of joy and wonder with his juggling and unicycle-riding, his tight-rope-walking and magician's tricks.

It was on 7 August 1974 that he hit the headlines with his heart- and crowd-stopping stunt in New York.

The Twin Towers had taken a grip on Petit's imagination six years previously - before they were even built - when he saw an illustrated model of them in a magazine at his dentist's. They obsessed him: they were his, he had to interact with them! He found out everything he could about them, collecting photos, articles, studies, even visiting New York to follow their construction live and photograph them from the air.

Armed with all this data, he made a scale model of the towers, on which he trained, for hours, months and years, his little team of helpers making the cord sway, bounce and dance, simulating wind conditions at some 1368 feet above ground. He worked out what kind of equipment he would need and how to span the 140-foot gap between the towers with his 450-pound steel cable: the wire.

Parallel to this, he and the team were working out the logistics of the operation, how to smuggle themselves and their equipment into the towers and up to the roof - no one was exactly going to authorize the walk, now were they...

Petit got himself in by dressing up like one of the businessmen or construction workers who came and went quite freely. He noted what security measures were in place and when the builders knocked off at night, to ascertain exactly when he would have access to the roof.

This magnificent „artistic heist“ needed over six years to organize, longer than, say, the Great Train Robbery of just 11 years earlier...

On the eve of the walk, Petit and his helpers passed themselves off as contractors working on the roof, took their gear up to the 104th floor and hid it away ready.

The moment came and they went into ac-



A tiny figure 417 metres above New York

tion. Using a specially constructed bow and arrow, they shot larger and larger ropes across the gap until they were finally able to pass across the heavy steel cable, securing it with guy-ropes to maximize stability.

The day of the walk dawned. Philippe Petit, holding a custom-made 26-foot, 55-pound pole to keep his balance, took a deep breath and stepped out from the safety of the roof onto the wire - a tiny figure, in the shape of a cross, 417 metres above New York.

He had no safety-net.

Open-mouthed, wide-eyed crowds gathered in the streets below as he walked back and forth eight times between the towers. He was up there for over half an hour, walking, sitting, kneeling, lying down and prancing along the tightrope. He had no plan, no aim, except to walk the wire.

Eventually the police arrived on the scene, came up to the roof and ordered him to surrender. He flirted with them for a while, advancing and retreating, but finally returned to the roof - and was arrested, a situation he knew well from his days as a street-artist in Paris.

„Man on Wire“ said the laconic police report.

A few hours later Petit walked out of the police station and into the history-books and hearts of New York, a folk-hero. He was not charged but had to do penance by performing for children in Central Park.

That was 35 years ago and times have changed. In today's New York even Petit wouldn't attempt a trick like that: The destruction of the Twin Towers on 9/11 launched Bush's War on Terror which means shooting first and asking questions afterwards...

But now times have changed again: Bush has gone - into the dustbin of history and Barack Obama has been sworn in as „44“, taking over from probably the worst in a line of US presidents of very variable quality. He inherits a wounded giant of a country, isolated, hated and feared internationally, bled dry and deeply divided internally. Never has a US president come to office amid so much rejoicing, with so many high hopes invested in him: Dr Martin Luther King's Dream made man; the true beginning of a multilateral world order; Peace in our Time; America, prodigal son coming home, lost sheep returning to the international fold. Human rights are to be put back on the agenda - Guantánamo razed, two illegal wars ended and troops brought home, torture outlawed; and back home, health insurance and education improved, financial crisis and green issues addressed, the spirit of solidarity, generosity and service revived. Never have so many hoped for so much from so few.

Barack Obama is a man walking a tightrope - between the Twin Towers of what is expected of him and what he will be able to do - after all, the forces that pulled the strings of George W. Bush haven't just thrown down their guns and ridden off into the sunset ... Obama cannot fail, cannot fall. He has no safety net ...

... Like Philippe Petit walking his wire. I actually met Petit - late 1973, early 1974 - in a bar in Montparnasse. He talked about his work, intense, driven. I asked him why he did it. He said he loved watching people become children again, seeing the wonder in their eyes. Then he asked me the time. I glanced at my wrist: no watch! I looked up startled, but he was dangling it between two fingers, watching my eyes - then smiling at the wonder in them.

Dear Barack Obama: if you succeed, there may not be much wonder in our eyes, though you can expect respect and gratitude. Even if you fail you can expect these things - for having made the attempt, for having faced down our fears.

But we want you to succeed above all else and we hope our great expectations will bear you up for a long time to come, up there on your high wire.

Just don't look down.