

Arts, man on wire, and bomb the suburbs

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Lilian Sun Maczynska The Literary Imagination 20 August 2012 Arts, Man on Wire, and Bomb the Suburbs Pan to Houston, Texas at night. On an episode of Stephen Fry in America, produced by Andre Singer, standing on a stage in a dimly lit room, surrounded by Houston's elite, actor and comedian Stephen Fry speaks of the importance of the arts. "Oscar Wilde quite rightly said, 'All art is useless'. And that may sound as if that means it's something not worth supporting. But if you actually think about it, the things that matter in life are useless. Love is useless. Wine is useless. Art is the love and wine of life.

It is the extra, without which life is not worth living." In contrast to Fry, there are people who wish the government would cut funding for the arts. And then there are the artists. People who fight for the right to practice their art, whether they consciously know they're fighting or not. People who will go to amazing lengths to showcase their art, and their dedication and determination is what gets them mentioned year after year after year. People like Philippe Petit, the quirky French high-wire artist who flew from France just to walk on a wire across the Twin Towers, whose life is forever immortalized in the documentary Man on Wire.

People like William "Upsy" Wimsatt, one of the most prolific Chicago-born graffiti artists, who inspired a generation of graffiti artists to view graffiti as an art form in his book Bomb the Suburbs!. Using whatever methods they can, illegal or not, they both worked to achieve their dreams and send their message to the world. They managed to pull people out of the blase outlook mentioned in Georg Simmel's scholarly essay The Metropolis and Mental Life.

One of the most prominent situations where an artist's dream pulled people out of the unconcerned manner in which they carried themselves was the <https://assignbuster.com/arts-man-on-wire-and-bomb-the-suburbs/>

1974 high-wire walk between the Twin Towers by Philippe Petit. High-wire walking is a form of tightrope walking, much like tight-wire walking, which is the simple art of maintaining balance while walking on a tensioned wire. The difference between the two is that high-wire is at a much greater height. The amount of concentration and balance and individual must have to accomplish this is extremely important in the art of tightrope walking. This is a testament to the level of professionalism and dedication that Petit had. Although he gained his notoriety in the US for walking between the twin towers, he was already gaining observations from various other places in the world, such as France, where he walked between the two spires of the Notre Dame Cathedral, and Australia, where he walked between the two sides of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Petit realized his dream of walking between the Twin Towers when he was sixteen, soon after he had taken up high-wire walking, while in the dentist's office and seeing an artist's rendering of the towers as they would look when built.

His passion for the art of high wire is best explained by Petit himself in the documentary *Man on Wire* directed by James Marsh. "Life should be lived on the edge of life. You have to exercise rebellion: to refuse to tape yourself to rules, to refuse your own success, to refuse to repeat yourself, to see every day, every year, every idea as a true challenge - and then you are going to live your life on a tightrope." Because of his strong desire to be anything but boring, Petit put everything he had into his art.

He practiced with family and friends, letting them help him improve so that one day he would achieve that dream of walking between the Twin Towers. After many years of planning and many hours the previous night setting up,

Petit began taking his first steps on the wire. They were all indifferent and did not notice, except the people who were in on 'the coup' (his nickname for the act). In 1903, German sociologist, Georg Simmel speaks of the blasé attitude the sights and sounds of the city brought to its inhabitants in his essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life*. There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which has been so unconditionally reserved to the metropolis as the blasé attitude. The blasé attitude results first from the rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves. " (Simmel par. 5) This is very much the attitude New Yorkers had when Petit started walking across the wire, on the Morning of August 7, 1974. Only after his then girlfriend, Annie Allix, began screaming and pointing to the people around them " Look! Look! Look, a wire-walker! He's walking! did people look up and see him, this magnificent artist, walking on the wire, and they were astounded. Said the police officer, Sgt. Charles Daniels, who was sent to apprehend him, " ... I observed the tight rope dancer... because you couldn't call him a walker... approximately half-way between the two towers. I personally figured I was watching something that somebody else would never see again in the world. Thought it was once in a lifetime. " By following his dream, no matter the risk (falling to his death, getting arrested for trespassing), Philippe Petit brought to the world, his own little piece of art, forever immortalized in history, and will always be known as the man who laid in the clouds. Fast forward twenty years, and you've wandered into the time period of William "Upski" Wimsatt. A poor white boy, growing up in the ghetto of Chicago, he was gifted with the art of graffiti. Graffiti is a form of public art, usually spray painted on walls, lamppost, mail boxes, or any other public surfaces, originally used as a form of marking territories between

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gangs. As time progressed, it became less of a mark of territory, and more of an art form.

When graffiti emerged as an art form in the late 1960s in New York City, it was immediately a contentious topic. (Bowen 22) The connotation with gangs and vandalism have fueled the media to paint it in a negative light, and many graffiti artists, or “writers” as many of them consider themselves, feel that if they spoke up about it, they would be patronized for their art and passion, especially since so many artists came from the ghetto, so instead, they just continued to quietly graffiti on their own, only signing their pieces with their signature, or what is known in the graffiti world as a “tag”.

Above: William “Upski” Womsott’s tag (left), A piece by Upski entitled “Upski” (right) A 20-year-old Wimsatt saw the injustice behind this and set out to “...be a pioneering graffiti writer, to be a hip-hop organizer in Chicago, and the be a hip hop journalist.” (Wimsatt 164) in order to revel in the art of graffiti. He writes “... let’s celebrate the city. Let’s celebrate the ghetto and the few people who aren’t running away from it. Let’s stop fucking up the city.

Let’s stop fucking up the ghetto. Let’s start defending it and making it work for us.” (Wimsatt 11) On the surface of it all, it seems as if Wimsatt only has a strong personal vendetta against suburbs, but he also supports the art of graffiti in a strong way, being an artist himself. With the publication of his book, he inspired a generation of graffiti artists in the 80s and 90s to not hide their art, but to display it proudly and have pride in it and they city in which they live.

Although the act of vandalism is illegal (Wimsatt tells of stories where he had to hide and run from the police, or what he perceived to be the police in his paranoia), Wimsatt encourages the act of graffiti in spaces where it can be seen, writing to a fan and fledgling graffiti artist, “ Choose spots that maximize the good impact of the work, while minimizing its bad side-effects. Maximize public exposure, surprisingness and daring of a piece, while minimizing its insult, and cost to people of the city.

The best targets for piecing are usually abandoned buildings, rooftops, and neighborhood permission walls, especially in unexpected places. Questionable targets include all public or private property that gets buffed and raises the cost of living. ” (Wimsatt 57) With this, he deliberately proves that he wants to bring recognition and fame to the beauty of the art of graffiti for the art, and not for any destructive reason. Petit and Wimsatt have both brought fame to themselves, and their arts.

They both risked getting arrested by the police to be able to showcase this, to inspire a nation, and to motivate a generation. Through diligence, commitment, and persistence, artists every day, not just Philippe Petit and William “ Upsi” Wimsatt, contribute to the life force of the arts, as more and more people become aware of the importance of the arts, and rally to support it. Petit and Though, yes, the arts are not necessary to live, and not every person needs it to be able to sustain a job or anything of the like, however, if one would just imagine the works without art, it is a bleak world.

No paintings, no music, no tv, no fashion, no anything that makes this world one worth living in. Like Stephen Fry said, “ Art is the love and wine of life. It is the extra, without which life is not worth living. ” 10 Philippe Petit and

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William “ Upski” Wimsatt unquestionably believe that. Works Cited * Bowen, Tracey E. " Graffiti Art: A Contemporary Study of Toronto Artists. " Studies in ArtEducation41. 1 (1999): 22-23. Print. * Fry, Stephen. " Mountains and Plains. " Stephen Fry in America. Dir. John-Paul Davidson and Michael Waldman.

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