

# The face in the clouds

Philippe Petit, 60, on the highs of his wire walking and the horror of losing his only child

Sometimes I wake up at two in the afternoon, other days I'm up by 5am. I like to start my day early, but I'm also a night person. When I wake up, I'm unhappy: there are so many things I'm passionate about, yet I realise the day is short. If I'm pressed for time I might have a yoghurt and a banana. If not, I will have something more complicated like a chorizo omelette.

I can survive on little sleep, but not sleeping the whole night before a wire walk is a thing of the past. At the World Trade Center in 1974, I spent the whole night rigging the wire because I had to; now professionals help me. In the past I would rig the wire with half a second to spare before the show: changing from construction worker, all greasy and tired, into performer. When I perform there is a change in my personality and focus. I become the man on wire just before I touch the wire with my feet – it is a strange process of changing skins.

I train for three hours a day. I limber up, juggle and practise high-wire walking. I keep my equipment in the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City, where I am an artist in residence. Here, I have my office and even a practice wire set invisibly between the balconies of Synod Hall. For 20 years I helped out with the care of the cathedral's chandeliers: twice a year I would change 150 lightbulbs. I was the only one who dared. I call the cathedral my spiritual home. Without this space I would have gone mad. I love being surrounded by its beauty, serenity and mystery. The stones and carvings talk to me.

My life is one of extremes. I have my life here in New York, living in a fabulous retreat in the Catskills with my partner Kathy. And then I have my home in Paris, little bigger than a broom closet, which I've had since I was 17. I love going back there to rediscover my beginnings.



Lunch varies. Some days Kathy and I do an amazing lunch and invite guests. Other days I skip it. I am a complete gourmet and Kathy is a fabulous cook. Whenever she cooks something new that I enjoy, we add it to a book of recipes called PP's Faves. She knows how to make me happy.

What I love about life is the natural order of things. I didn't decide to become a high-wire walker. I was attracted by the idea of presenting marvels. It wasn't an intellectual choice, it was more beautiful than that it was a calling I answered at the age of six. I have now done 78 wire-walking performances all over the world and

I'm working on my next one – it will be a walk for literacy in Manhattan in mid-October.

The World Trade Center walk was a performance like no other, almost a kind of exploration. Even now I clearly remember what I saw when I looked down. It was a multiple-level vision. I was looking at the ground full of little ants: my spectators. At the same time, looking down and spending quite a few minutes sitting on the wire, I sensed the immensity of what I was doing. I was suspended a quarter of a mile in the sky, a place where humans do not belong. It was a vision that filled my heart with joy and a certain power. I was

venturing into another world. I had silent dialogues with birds. I felt the cable moving in the breeze and the affiliation of the wire. I was a young poet, trying something without really knowing what he was trying.

All my performances are one of a kind. I like the ephemeral nature of such presentations because if you do something every day, how can you present a miracle? I like the idea of working for months or even years on a performance that lasts 18 minutes and then is gone.

My daughter's sudden disappearance at the age of nine and a half was the most crushing moment of my life. She died of a brain haemorrhage without warning in 1992. But I have come to realise that one should not be blinded by the negative. Although she had a short life, she had a full one. She travelled with me, meeting incredible people and witnessing *la joie de vivre*. Sometimes a scene in a movie will remind me of her death and I will burst into tears, but other times I will see a picture in a book that reminds me of her humour and I will burst out laughing. That's what life should be about.

For me, relaxing is hell as what I love is to compose my life of activities. Right now, I am learning Russian and writing a book on a barn I've built using 18th-century tools. Instead of relaxing, I have ways of calming my mind and recollecting my spirit. The end of the day is a calming time when I might have a cigar and a glass of Chablis.

Just before I fall asleep, I like putting my mind into discovery mode. I resist falling asleep to the point I feel I am a fool for resisting so much. Then I let myself go. I often solve problems in my sleep. I might drift off doing little sketches of the anchor-point of a wire that has been on my mind, and when I wake up I have the solution.

**Interview by Natasha Higgins**  
**Photograph by Name Name**