

“The City as Art” in Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin*

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ABSTRACT

Let the Great World Spin (2009) interweaves Colum McCann’s historical narrative with Philippe Petit’s high-wire walk, revealing peculiar socio-historical and past-present connections. The high-wire walk across the Twin Towers incarnates McCann’s idea of the city as art, demonstrating different connections between life and art, past and present as well as socio-historical linkages. First, the performance creates a parallel vision of the city in which the breathtaking performance in the air reflects life’s uncertainty and vulnerability in different areas, classes, and even races on the ground. The vision generates resonances among various walks of life, each striving to identify opportunities for balance. Secondly, the daunting scene of the performance takes the spectators by surprise, disrupts their habitual sensory reactions, and thrusts them into new perceptions and responses. The responses, more than reconfiguring the sensible or the visible, evoke the memories of the past and activate pressing related queries. Prominently, the memories and queries unveil unexpected socio-historical configurations and persistent dynamic relationships between the past and the present. Employing Petit’s performance as the novel’s central image, McCann not only makes a distinct vision of the cityscape but also distinguishes his historical perspective. Prominently, what underlies McCann’s historical perspective in accounting for socio-historical intricacies is his overcoming the suspension of thought and words in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

KEYWORDS: Colum McCann, *Let the Great World Spin*,
historical narrative, city, art

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科拉姆·麥卡恩《讓偉大世界轉動》 的「城市即藝術」史觀

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摘 要

在《讓偉大世界轉動》(*Let the Great World Spin*, 2009) 書中，科拉姆·麥卡恩 (Colum McCann) 以菲利普·珀蒂 (Philippe Petit) 於 1974 年在紐約世貿雙子塔 (Twin Towers) 的高空走鋼索表演為敘述主軸，呈現獨特的歷史觀點和敘事角度。麥卡恩將藝術融入歷史敘事，打破藝術和歷史的疆界，呈現藝術和生活、現在和過去的另類連結。書中的高空走鋼索的現場表演將紐約變成藝術表達的媒介及舞台，重塑城市的時空關係，形構「城市即藝術」的概念。高空走鋼索的現場表演所凸顯的概念，除了強調城市潛在的藝術特質，讓在場觀眾成為表演的一部分。更值得探討的是，麥卡恩藉由這些既是觀眾又是藝術表演參與者的回應，揭露社會、歷史錯綜複雜的關係，呼應紐約不同區塊、階級和種族的邊緣生活，並檢視歷史事件對社會的衝擊。《讓偉大世界轉動》就某種意義而言，是後 911 寫作的轉向，麥卡恩以藝術切入，重塑不同時空和歷史社會交織的對應關係，以獨特的方式重新審視現在和過去的斷裂、延續和糾結。重要的是，麥卡恩的歷史敘事所融入的藝術語彙和圖像，具體跨越了 911 攻擊事件所造成的「思維和文字的懸置」。

關鍵詞：麥卡恩、《讓偉大世界轉動》、911 事件、城市、藝術

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I. Introduction

Let the Great World Spin (2009), Colum McCann's best-known novel, interweaves a historical narrative with Philippe Petit's high-wire walk between the World Trade Center Towers performed in the 1970s. This novel stems from McCann's attempt to respond to the 9/11 attacks despite their being barely mentioned in the narrative. Greatly shocked by the incredibly devastating event, McCann found it hard to place meaning in the void left by the terrorist attacks.¹ Yet Paul Auster's writing about Petit's tightrope walk across the Twin Towers in *The Red Notebook* caused McCann to conceive the performance as "a spectacular act of art and bravado," "an act of creation that seemed to stand in direct defiance to the act of destruction twenty-seven years later" (McCann, "Walking" 359). More importantly, he looked upon it as a work of art "that talks to the human instinct for recovery and joy" (359), a means to walk out of the ashes and ruins. Since the novel is set in the 1970s, the "golden years" of performance art during which Petit high-wire walked across the Twin Towers (Banes 1), McCann ostensibly manifests the impact of the Vietnam War (1954-75) in New York. However, having the story end with a character seeing the picture of funambulism as an act of beauty in the twenty-first century, McCann makes a rather obscure but profound suggestion of the connection between the 9/11 attacks and the live performance which he regards as the impetus for recovery and revival. What is interesting is that the connection is not so much between the Vietnam War and the 9/11 attacks, but rather how the art performance at the Twin Towers forges the concept of "the city as art," which unfolds a concrete inscription of socio-historical relations and distinguishes McCann's historical interpretation.

New York, a world-famous city characterized by persistent vitality and incessant artistic creativity, has been portrayed with historical and social complexity in literary works such as John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952), James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962), and Paula Fox's *Desperate Characters* (1970). It was not until

¹ In "Walking an Inch off the Ground" at the end of *Let the Great World Spin*, McCann depicts the ineradicable image of his father-in-law who was covered with dust and had a heavy smell of smoke on his clothes as he came from the fifty-ninth floor of the north tower to his house at Seventy-first Street on the day of the 9/11 attacks. McCann found himself speechless after the sudden change of everything in Manhattan in the aftermath. He wondered how and where to find meaning in the world after the astonishing and catastrophic event until he saw the light in Petit's tightrope walk in Paul Auster's book (McCann, "Walking" 357-59).

the 9/11 attacks that the depiction of that urban space became an unprecedentedly challenging and disheartening task. Among the various attempts in recapping the event, contemporary American writers like Don DeLillo, Jonathan Safran Foer, Teju Cole, and McCann, try to limn the attack and its ripple effect by taking New York as the major loci for their responses to the event. The powerful presence of New York in the post-9/11 writing indicates the desperate attempt to make sense of the attacks. Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), and Cole's *Open City* (2011) portray the unspeakable loss, grief, angst, and disorientation in New York. *Let the Great World Spin*, in contrast, taking a temporal leap, intriguingly centers on art performance in New York, which elicits responses to the Vietnam War instead of the 9/11 attacks. The performance of the high-wire walk not only renews the literary presence of urban space but stages it in a different manner to address 9/11.

McCann's alluding to Petit's tightrope walk in 1974 innovates urban writing. The performance creates a vision of the city rather different from that of literary convention. For McCann, the city is not merely the setting of the story but also the stage of the performance, evidencing the artistic character of the city. The performance reframes the city in terms of time and space, altering what is presumed to be sensible and visible. It aligns with Jacques Rancière's politics of aesthetics in artistic practice which recasts the distribution of the sensible. Nonetheless, there are two dimensions in McCann's reconfiguring the sensible and the visible. For one, the high-wire walk across the Twin Towers makes an unbelievable and daunting vision of the city, pricking every nerve of the spectator. The other is that McCann reconceptualizes the city as art with which a distinct historical perspective is forged.

Yet, to understand McCann's idea of the city as art, it is crucial to delve into the nature of performance art in urban spaces before investigating the historical perspective the performance unfolds. The following investigation of McCann's novel hence starts from the investigation of the literary presentation of the city and proceeds to the examination of McCann's "the city as art" by re-orienting the literary presence of the city with performance art. McCann's employment of live performance in *Let the Great World Spin* in a sense aligns with what Bruce Wilshire contends about the paratheatrical, in which the boundary between fiction and fact, art and life is blurred. It is the non-theater space that enacts a theatrical effect (169). The effect of the paratheatrical is

particularly true to performance art since it engages everyone in the city not merely as a spectator but as a participant. Moreover, it is set in a real place, and its time "is used in nontheatrical ways—as real time" (Banes 3). Significantly, it is through deciphering "the city as art" that McCann's perspective on historical events and socio-historical intertwinings is unveiled.

II. New York as Presented in Post-9/11 Novels

Post-9/11 writing, as observed, tends to highlight reconfigured urban space and altered social practice. Karolina Golimowska, in *The Post-9/11 City in Novels*, examines through historical review the changes in literary portrayures of New York and London after 9/11. Golimowska claims that the "post-9/11 novel is preeminently a city novel and as such it is organized, written and to be read through (the urban) space. It . . . creates new spaces within the urban context and reassigns meaning within the city cosmos" (8). Golimowska foregrounds the relationship between the reconstructed space and the altered meanings of New York in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, marking its historical impact. To her, the 9/11 attacks refashion the language of the cityscape in which new spaces emerge. But how are these new spaces forged and what are the underlying meanings of post-9/11 New York?

Golimowska maintains that walking in the city was the prominent means by which the newly-created urban space was perceived or experienced. Adopting Michel de Certeau's idea of walking in the city, she finds that the walking experience in urban areas has transitioned from the nineteenth-century *flâneur's* aimless strolling to the twenty-first century urbanite's acute confrontation with fear and shock in the post-9/11 urban scenario (Golimowska 7). While the *flâneur* maintained a detached stance toward the urban scenario, the modern urbanite is confronted with a twenty-first century cityscape inscribed by historical trauma, collective memories, and cultural and social reactions. The twenty-first century city is portrayed as a place of vulnerability and danger. A city walk is thus transformed into an unpredictable adventure, full of risk, danger, and even shock.

Some prominent post-9/11 novels construct newly generated urban space via walking, illustrating inevitable encounters with uncertainty and insecurity. Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Cole's *Open City* both illustrate the remapping of urban space in peregrinations through post-9/11 New

York. In Foer's book, a little boy endeavors to find the traces of his father by journeying in the city in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. In Cole's story, the main character's walk in the post-9/11 city reveals less what he sees than what he does not—what has disappeared. In addition to the ruined landscape of the city, there is the personal import of the self-identity problem in the protagonist's reflection on his emigration from Nigeria and confrontation with racism in New York. Ostensibly, these two books proffer either a linear or a spot-by-spot vision of the urban space, following the mode of conventional urban walking. In actuality, the cityscape is recast as a space marked by uncertainty as well as socio-historical complexity.

Furthering Golimowska's arguments on the post-9/11 cityscape, Keith Wilhite sees the city as the site of contradiction and conflict. He contends that the post-9/11 cityscape is characterized by "'the precariousness of human existence' in an interconnected yet, at times, decentered and unfamiliar world" (4). Again, it is vulnerability and insecurity that characterize urban experiences. Drawing on the concepts of urban alienation and disorientation, Katerina Tsiokou's study of the post-9/11 city lays stress on the renegotiation of one's identity in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural milieu. And, investigating DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, Tsiokou reveals the repercussions of self-recognition in New York owing to the devastating impact of the 9/11 attacks. She indicates that the "diverse, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural character" of New York presents "the crucial process of re-negotiating individual and collective national identities by acknowledging their hybridity and in-betweenness" (v). The multi-ethnic and multi-cultural character of New York in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks becomes more acute and makes inevitable identity reformulation and adjustment of the self-other relationship.²

From the discussion above, the literary presentation of post-9/11 New York displays an interesting spectrum spanning the creation of new spaces, displacement, and complex identity configuration triggered by urban insecurities, uncertainties, and even collisions in the cityscape. Yet, as acknowledged, these concepts are not new in urban discourse. What

² Tsiokou's notion of the self-other relation echoes Golimowska's perspective of the urban space. Among the features of the urban space in post-9/11 literary presentation, Golimowska finds that the urban other or otherness is the essential attribute of the urban space. The sense of other or otherness mirrors inner fears, prejudices, and insecurities. Interestingly, this feature makes the city a figure of the other as well, one teeming with ruptures, shocks, and uncertainties. Moreover, the urban otherness is what one inevitably encounters or collides with in daily life.

distinguishes New York in the post-9/11 novels is what Tsiokou observes—"the façade of homogeneity dominating the political rhetoric in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack conceals the inequalities and tensions that are embedded in the American society" (61). But what exactly do these inequalities and tensions designate? This question certainly brooks no easy answer. But what is certain is that clear demarcations between right and wrong, good and evil no longer justify what happened to New York. What the authors describing the post-9/11 city highlight is the concealed social and historical entanglements in the cityscape, detailing how people, under the shadow of traumatic memories, struggle to reorient and resituate themselves in the face of what was stirred up or uncovered by the fatal attacks. More significantly, the tensions and anxiety resulting from the social and historical complexities uncovered by the 9/11 attacks made New York a vivid image yearning for more compelling historical reflection and social re-configuration.

With Petit's walk, McCann renders a distinct perspective and response to the 9/11 attacks. Like most of the post-9/11 writers, McCann acutely sensed the difficulty of addressing the event. He confessed that he felt it was "quite impossible to write something that would break your heart, because anyone with any sort of heart had it broken that morning" ("*Let the Great World Spin* Q&A"). Yet McCann stated that rather than focusing on the overwhelming shock or grief, "I wanted to shake 9/11 out of my body by going all the way back to a different point of innocence. I wanted to know how I felt about war, and art and liberation theology, and issues of technology, all these things that were on our minds back in '74 and are on our minds of today also" ("Conversation" 363). Instead of depicting the social vulnerability and uncertainty by means of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, McCann reconsiders history, investigates its linkage with the present, and uncovers concealed socio-historical intricacy. And it is in the linkage between past and present that McCann illuminates another vision of history that reveals the glint of hope and recovery.

McCann is not the only one who has adapted the high-wire walk to literary or artistic creation as a response to the 9/11 attacks. Quite a few critics, artists, and writers take the high-wire walk as an implicit and potential response. Before McCann, the association of Petit's walk with the terrorist attacks was presented on a 2006 cover of *The New Yorker*. The picture shows the image of Petit on the wire holding his balance pole in the middle of the air, but without the Twin

Towers in the background. The vacancy under his feet marks the unimaginable loss and fear resulting from the 9/11 attacks. *The New Yorker's* adaptation of Petit's walk is a compelling parody and forceful reminder of man's susceptibility and vulnerability rather than an act transcending human limits in ultimate risk.

In contrast to the visual image in *The New Yorker* is the film titled *Man on Wire* (2008), based on Petit's book *To Reach the Clouds* (2002) and directed by James Marsh. It presents the high-wire walk between the Twin Towers from preparation to performance. Marsh does not specifically refer in his movie to the 9/11 attacks; instead, he stresses the beauty, thrill, and joy of Petit's feat, marking the invincible challenge and the spirit of the adventure. In a review, Bryand Appleyard observes that Marsh's presentation of the walk renders "a mood of anticipatory sadness and nostalgia for a pre-9/11 world." And, owing to the 9/11 attacks, Martin Randall asserts that it is no longer possible to have "an innocent eye" for Petit's walk. Randall sees Marsh's film as an implicit allusion and even a "reversal" of 9/11 (Randall 89). The artwork exceeds "the familiar discourses of tragedy, mourning, and redemption and acknowledges less conventional representations" (93). No longer taken as a work of pure art, the incredible high-wire walk is viewed as a significant response to history, straddling life and death, high and low, here and there. More than presenting man's invincible capacity, the tightrope walk becomes an icon for diverse ideas ranging from an abyss of fear and risk to a glimpse of sadness, hope, and nostalgia in facing the historical disaster. Yet, what should be further explored is in what way the performance exceeds the general account of tragedy and mourning and, in contrast to *The New Yorker's* image and March's movie, why and how McCann makes distinct his historical perspective with art performance.

III. Philippe Petit's Walk as Art Performance

The high-wire walk as the focal image of the novel foregrounds McCann's concern with the historical impact on social situations. In conversation with Nathan Englander, McCann revealed that funambulism is "the core image of the novel" and that he "used the tightrope walk as a way to pull the reader through the novel" ("Conversation" 363). There are two dimensions to examine regarding the core image of the novel. First, when asked if he thinks *Let the*

Great World Spin is a 9/11 book, McCann responds in the affirmative and adds that it was the high-wire walk that inspired him to look back into history to write about the calamitous event (362-63). Hence, it can be inferred that McCann's staging of the tightrope walk in the 1970s is an oblique response to the 9/11 attacks by enfolding the past within the present. Coinciding with the time of the tightrope walk, the story is set when the Vietnam War was about to come to an end—a time when "[t]he Bronx was burning. The soldiers were home from Vietnam. The city was going bankrupt. Artists were questioning themselves. . . . The justice system was crumbling. . . . The deeper I discovered the *then* of New York, the more profoundly it seemed to be talking toward the *now*" (McCann, "Walking" 359-60). The incredible feat thus evokes acutely painful memories inscribed by the Vietnam War and incorporates implicit reflection on 9/11. Secondly, the tightrope walk manifests how art mirrors life down on the ground; as McCann delineates, the tightrope walk in the air reflects "the ordinary people on the street, the ones who walked a tightrope just an inch off the ground" (359-60). Yet, the question is what historical reflection the performance illuminates and how the mutual reflection of art and life distinguishes McCann's vision of social conditions.

Speaking on *Let the Great World Spin*, both Eóin Flannery and Jelena Lj Pršić regard the high-wire walk as beauty which has the power of redemption. To Flannery, it is the high-wire walk acting as an icon of beauty that redeems, while the beauty that Pršić foregrounds lies in daily encounters, referring to the kindness and empathy in actual social interactions. Flannery focuses on visual and spectacular art, observing that "the achievement of aesthetic beauty, its visual record, is essentially a bodily experience" (312). In terms of visual and sensory experiences, Flannery explicates how the beauty of the walk transmutes into the power of redemption. But what is somewhat reductive and esoteric is how the beauty of the live performance becomes an anchor for redemption.

Pršić, likewise, accentuates the redemptive potential of beauty as presented by McCann. Yet, different from Flannery, Pršić sees the beauty in social interactions, as depicted in one of the characters' words—"the comfort from the hard, cold truth—the filth, the war, the poverty—that life could be capable of small beauties" (20). Pršić maintains that even if death and suffering are inevitably juxtaposed in reality, there is still beauty embedded in the inevitable loss and sadness of daily encounters. Interestingly, these two critiques, though seen from different perspectives, converge on the redemptive

power of beauty. Both Flannery and Pršić acknowledge that the live performance sheds light on the situation of life in New York. Yet, the relation between the high-wire walk and social life should be further investigated to discern in what way the performance can be redemptive; or, other than being redemptive, what else the walk can designate as a form of art. Hence, the following investigates the art performance and how it reflects the state of New York, just as McCann says—“we are all funambulists. He did his walk high in the air. I try mine on the page. My characters tightrope the street. We are connected” (“*Let the Great World Spin Q&A*”).

The high-wire walk is performance art that epitomizes a prominent feature of contemporary art and culture—“a shift to the live” (Heathfield, “Alive” 7).³ Underscoring the immediate, the interactive, and the disruptive, live art, according to Adrian Heathfield, is “employed as a generative force: to shock, to destroy presence, to break apart traditions of representations, to foreground the experiential, to open different kinds of engagement with meaning, to activate audiences” (“Alive” 7). It breaks away from conventions of art in terms of form and content and challenges existing ideas or meanings. In addition, being staged in everyday scenarios, live art first alters the perception of space and time. In “Taking Place: Encountering the Live,” Andrew Quick foregrounds the “taking place” of the live performance detaching one from the conventional or the habitual. To Quick, “taking place” has two layers of meaning. One refers to the immediate performance at the place; the other indicates how the live performance *takes the place* of the established ideas or categorization. It results in “a suspension of those systems of understanding that would run ahead of our experience . . . the live can be seen literally to ‘take’ place, removing from the scene of experience those pre-existing referential frameworks . . .” (93). That is, the re-figured space diverts one’s perception and recognition, disengaging one from previous spatial recognition and displacing existing concepts or understanding, as exemplified by the high-wire walk in the novel. More than suspending habitual ideas or presupposed meanings, the performance evokes memories of the Vietnam War and the history of black slavery, highlighting the socio-historical and past-present connections.

³ According to Jennie Klein, performance/live art is a discipline that stems from the neo-avant-garde sensibilities of art school graduates who wanted to try something more than painting and sculpture. Live art especially refers to “live-based” art practices (33).

The socio-historical and past-present connections triggered by the re-figured time and place of art performance are first evidenced by the interlaced storylines in *Let the Great World Spin*. As mentioned in the foregoing, the tightrope walk in the air mirrors the risky and uncertain life on the ground. Life on the ground is epitomized by an Irish Catholic monk, Corrigan, who immigrated to the Bronx and vowed to live a life of chastity and poverty. In the Bronx, with its rampant prostitution, violence, and drugs, Corrigan is like a missionary of God. He offers the prostitutes shelter and takes care of the elderly in a nursing home. He keeps a close relationship with the prostitutes Tillie and her daughter Jazzlyn, who are black, and the nurse Adelita (Adie). Yet Corrigan dies in a car accident while driving Jazzlyn home after she is released from detention by the police.

Interestingly, it is in Corrigan's story that McCann weaves the warp and weft of the novel. First, Jazzlyn, killed in a car accident, has a daughter, Jaslyn. The little girl is later adopted by a black woman, Gloria, who forms a support group with Marcia and Claire to deal with the trauma of losing her sons in the Vietnam War. Coincidentally, the day of their meeting happens to be the very day of the tightrope walk. Secondly, the car that crashes into Corrigan's, resulting in his death, is driven by Blaine, with Lara in the passenger's seat. Blaine, a movie director, and Lara, an artist, had been taking Lara's paintings to New York on that day for sale. However, Blaine avoids taking responsibility for Corrigan's death, making Lara feel embarrassed and sorry. She pays her condolences by returning Corrigan's things left at the scene of the accident to Ciaran, Corrigan's brother, and attends his funeral. Lara later falls in love with Ciaran and migrates with him to Ireland.

These storylines of the novel are woven into an intricate meshwork of time and space, revealing different socio-historical strata in New York. Temporally speaking, the memory conjured up by the performance unveils the relation between present and past. In terms of space, the tightrope walk, high in the air, builds a structure that everyone down below can see, regardless of their class, age, and race, fashioning an immediate sense of collective being. Claire, on seeing the incredible walk up in the air, is impressed by the transformed urban space. She sees it as "[t]he intersection of a man with the city, the abruptly reformed, the newly appropriated public space, the city as art. Walk up there and make it new. Making it a different space" (McCann, *Let* 103). Turning the

city into a piece of art, McCann places distinct voices on the same plane, juxtaposing different socio-historical layers in urban space.

The spectators' responses to the art performance reflect their social positions and voice disparate personal experiences. Adie, a nurse in the nursing home and a close friend of Corrigan, sees the performance as a cross. To her, it is an act of "challenging God, a man above the cross rather than below" (McCann, *Let* 284). She reads it as a blasphemous act against religious belief. Judge Solomon Soderberg, Claire's husband, looks upon it as an infringement of the law, lamenting about the paradox of the city, saying that "[t]he city was bigger than its buildings, bigger than its inhabitants too. It had its own nuances. It accepted whatever came its way, the crime and the violence and the little shocks of good that crawled out from underneath the everyday" (248). Nonetheless, what the performance art elicits is more than an act exceeding or transgressing certain religious beliefs or social recognition. It sheds light on significant socio-historical entanglements in the cityscape.

The socio-historical complexity is brought to the fore in Solomon and Claire's subsequent responses. Solomon's reaction to funambulism is ambivalent. On the one hand, he thinks that the tightrope walker should be brought to justice and punished by being forced to do the walk again. On the other hand, Solomon cynically questions how America became "[t]he sort of place where you should be allowed to walk as high as you wanted. But what if you were the one walking underneath? What if the tightrope walker had fallen?" (McCann, *Let* 262). Solomon's reaction is not out of nowhere. The tight-rope walk roughly coincides with the end of the Vietnam War, which took about 58,200 American lives.⁴ Owing to this concurrence, Solomon takes a grim questioning stance on the value of America for which his son Joshua sacrificed his life. His son had "joined up to represent his country and came home to lay Claire flat with grief. And to lay him flat also." Ironically, the war was fought in the name of "the very ideals that were under assault in his court every day" (263). The performance obviously evoked Solomon's memory and aroused his anger at daily confrontations with the socio-historical paradox in court. The spectator's reactions manifest how the city stages art and thereby conjures up socio-historical and past-present connections.

⁴ The Vietnam War traumatized America as it "had pierced the myth of American invincibility and had bitterly divided the nation" ("Vietnam War").

IV. The City as Art

By means of unveiling the socio-historical, past-present connections, McCann reconceptualizes the city as art which distinguishes his historical narrative. That is, to delve into the notion of "the city as art" rendered by the high-wire walk, two aspects should be examined: one is the mechanism turning the city into art which refers to the engagement of the spectator. The other is McCann's historical perspective forged in the notion of the city as art which presents a unique vision of socio-historical linkages.

Spectatorship has inevitable prominence in performance art, especially live performance. The engagement of the spectator in live performance is generally unpredictable and unrecognizable, as he is taken in by and instinctively reacts to the performance. And, similar to what Rancière contends about the politics of aesthetics, performance art has an obvious, immediate, and compelling impact on what is visible and sensible. To Rancière, general knowledge or social recognition mostly reflects the distribution of the sensible which represents "the system of self-evident facts of sense perception" in society (*Politics* 12). The distribution of the sensible is essential to the social fabric in that "[h]uman beings are tied together by certain sensory fabric . . . which defines their way of being together; and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of 'being together'" (Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator* 56). In other words, the distribution of the sensible determines what is visible, sensible, and sayable, and solidifies the collective being. But the politics of aesthetics does not cling onto any given political beliefs or ideas implicit for collective action or movement, but frames "a particular sphere of experience" by dint of artistic practice (Rancière, *Aesthetics* 24). The artistic practice then enacts the "recasting of the distribution of the sensible, a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms" (63). It aligns with McCann's portrayal of the city as art—"Every now and then the city shook its soul out. It assailed you with an image, or a day, or a terror, or a beauty to wrap your mind around that you had to shake your head in disbelief" (*Let* 247). The city, much more than a place for living, is able to jolt people of the ordinary and the habitual, challenging how it is supposed to be sensed.

Drawing on Rancière's politics of aesthetics, Jill Bennett brings up the idea of "practical aesthetics" to explicate how art intervenes in everyday life. It is "an aesthetics informed by and derived from practical, real-world encounters,

an aesthetics that is in turn capable of being used or put into effect in a real situation” (Bennett, *Practical Aesthetics* 2). Bennett’s observation derives from the study of aesthetics in the late twentieth century when artistic reactions against social and historical situations prevailed.⁵ Importantly, practical aesthetics are the “processes that touch bodies intimately and directly but that also underpin the emotions, sentiments and emotion of public life” (3). That is, Bennett’s practical aesthetics highlights not merely the immediate corporeal reaction but the unanticipated and as yet un-sensed feelings and emotions. The intense appeal to corporeal sensation and perception in aesthetic experiences is well demonstrated by that of the high-wire walk in McCann. Distinguished by uncertainty and risk, the artistic practice radically renews the sensible or visible. And the reconfiguration of the sensible brings up what is not perceived or known about the past as well as self-other relations.

The high-wire walk across the Twin Towers in McCann’s writing is an immediate and astounding bodily performance.⁶ The unrecognizable performance makes a spectacle and invalidates the pre-established recognition. The live performance set in an unprecedented context overwhelms both spectators and the high-wire walker. The immediate perception is delineated by the tightrope walker in the following passage:

What happened then was that, for an instant, almost nothing happened. He wasn’t even there. . . . It felt like a sort of floating. . . . His body loosened and took on the shape of the wind. . . . Within seconds he was pureness moving, and he could do anything he liked. He was inside and

⁵ Curtis Carter finds that in the late twentieth century, “a social-political view of art links the art to changing social and political conditions” owing to the influence of Hegel, Marx, and their followers like Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Terry Eagleton, etc. (76). Following a similar vein, Bennett argues against the conventional notion that aesthetics should be separated or uprooted from life experience. By tracing back to its etymological origin which is related to the senses and the perception, *aisthesis*, Bennett claims that aesthetics is supposed to be engaged in one’s sensorio-emotional experience in daily life, foregrounding the inseparable relation between aesthetics and one’s life experience fabricated in the immediate social and political milieu.

⁶ The focus on the sensory or the body in performance, according to Peggy Phelan, emanates from the critique of World War II. It is to react against atrocious historical incidents in which “the concentration camps and atom bombs rendered death a mechanical and impersonal event” (Phelan 18). The body artists then concentrated on “an investigation of the body as a medium for art and for life” and “claimed their own bodies as a medium and metaphor for the relationship between self and other, performer and spectator, art and life, and life and death” (17). Investigating the acute corporeal suffering in World War II, a performance taking the body as the major medium signifies a different way of exploring the historical event. It indicates that the understanding of the world is no longer based on logical reasoning and conceptual assumption but corporeal reactions.

outside his body at the same time, indulging in what it meant to belong to the air, no future, no past, and this gave him the offhand vaunt to his walk. He was carrying his life from one side to the other. . . . He felt for a moment uncreated. Another kind of awake. (McCann, *Let* 164)

In the bodily performance, the walker perceives an un-bordered sense of his body, feeling as if he were pureness itself, merging with the air. The unnameable self-awareness gives him a totally new and unimaginable sense of breaking away from temporal, spatial, and social bondage and awakening to a new sense of being.

The spectator's perception in McCann's novel resonates with Bennett's argument that performance art is "not just as sources of inspiration or objects or representation, but as fundamental components of a dynamic between the artwork and the spectator" (*Empathic Vision* 23). While the performance is staged in a real-life scenario, it "transform[s] the urban landscape into what may be called a living stage" (Sánchez-Camus 78). The performance casts the resident in a peculiar setting and as both spectator and participant. Claire and Marcia, the mothers whose sons died in Vietnam, feel utterly amazed to see "the man in the air, walking" (McCann, *Let* 92). Claire, seized by fear, is displaced and distraught. She "stands, a little shaky at the knees. Disoriented. The voices around her a blur now. She is aware of her feet on the deep carpet. The clock moving but not sounding anymore" (99). The walk displaces what is habitually recognized and renews her sensory experiences. The clock that was normally heard is without sound; her feet, which she was not particularly conscious of, become acutely sensible. Overwhelmed by the incredible performance, Marcia is reminded of her son's plane crash in Vietnam. Moreover, her uncertainty and fear of what would happen to the man in the air activate the persistent trauma she has suffered since her son's death. As mentioned in the foregoing, the spectator, like the walker, experiences the process of being displaced and *replaced*.

The perception and reaction of the walker and spectator echo what Heathfield maintains: "Performance enables artists and spectators . . . [to] take leave of the bounds of place" ("Alive" 11). That means the performance enables the performer and spectator to transcend physical constraints and come to the sense of what is other than the habitually sensible and visible. More importantly, the spectator's perception manifests that performance is able to act

as “an agent of change” (Bennett, *Practical Aesthetics* 26). The change enacted by the aesthetic experience aligns with Rancière’s notion of the emancipated spectator—a concept derived from modern attempts to reform theatre. It is a shift from critical investigation to engaged participation in which “the passive audience of spectators must be transformed into its opposite” (Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator* 5). Remarkably, the emancipation of the spectators in artistic practice, according to Rancière, leads to “a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible” (72). The performance in McCann enacts the emancipation of the spectator from physical bonds and social positions, as mentioned above. More significantly, the emancipation contributes to multiple connections which are unimaginable without the high-wire walk. That is, the high-wire walk in McCann is less concerned with the uncharted sensory reactions than with the unexpected connections. And it is mainly the connections made possible by the re-distribution of the sensible that re-configures the social and historical recognition in McCann’s novel.

The connections triggered by the high-wire walk are manifested in the memories of the mothers traumatized by the Vietnam War. The memories evoked by funambulism align with Bennett’s argument that sense memory “doesn’t just present the horrific scene, the graphic spectacle of violence, but the physical imprint of the ordeal of violence” (*Empathic Vision* 39).⁷ Hence, sense memory can be evoked on different occasions and enables affect to emerge and course through expressive or aesthetic interaction, since affect is “not easily anchored in an image. It may be expressed, activated, or incited by an image; but at the same time, affect does not always come *from* a single image” (Bennett, *Practical Aesthetics* 21). The argument explains that as the mothers see the walk in the air, what it evokes is not merely the paradoxical sense of awe and beauty but the affect attached to the loss of their beloved. And along with the affect are social situations challenged or questioned, reflecting related historical investigations.

⁷ Sense memory is an idea that Bennett discerns in the poems of Charlotte Delbo, who is a Holocaust survivor. What features in Delbo’s works, Bennett thinks, is the sense memory which “designates precisely the realm of affective memory that Janet (Pierre Janet) regards as nameless—as outside memory proper” (*Empathic Vision* 25). Sense memory is inscribed in one’s senses, different from the memory which can be processed, identified, categorized, and represented as a certain kind of narrative.

Sense memory in McCann not merely leads to various reactions to the performance but discloses intricate socio-historical connections. Claire, gripped by fear and inexplicable grief after the high-wire walk, asks if Gloria will keep her company and says, "You know, I'd be happy to pay you, Gloria" (McCann, *Let* 299). Claire's request indicates how she sees others, especially black women. It pricks Gloria's sensitivity to racial discrimination. Claire's offer evokes Gloria's memory of her slave ancestry, implicating indissoluble racial conflicts. That is, the shock and fear upon seeing the walk not only remind them of their sons' deaths but also of the unresolvable racial conflicts in America.

According to Bennett, the connections triggered by the high-wire walk are constructed on the flow of affect, which moves from one experience to another. The linkages significantly unfold the ideas and values buried within memories. These can be instantiated by the reactions of the couple Claire and Solomon. While looking at the feat of the walk, Claire senses that "something else in it still rankles. . . . Something vulgar about the whole thing. . . . Something cheap" (McCann, *Let* 103). Enmeshed in the flow of affect, her ambivalent feeling lays bare memories of loss and pain. Perceiving "something cheap," Claire expresses her irritation by berating the high-wire walker: "How dare he do that with his own body? Throwing his life in everyone's face? Making her son's so cheap?" (113) She is furious at the walker's flagrance with his body, which she believes belittles the deaths of others. In the midst of the gathering of the mothers, she pulls back the curtain, exposing her refusal to see the performance. Yet, as the silence falls among them, Claire and the other mothers feel greatly disturbed and disoriented by not knowing how to view their sons' deaths. Obviously, the socio-historical fabric unfolded by the high-wire walk incurs the inevitable resonance and dissonance of affect.

Nonetheless, the flow of affect varies from person to person. In contrast to the antagonistic and cynical responses of Claire and Solomon, Gloria is immersed in critical racial tension. Feeling humiliated by Claire's offer, Gloria, the black mother who lost three beloved sons in the Vietnam War, leaves Claire's house and walks in the New York streets. Her walk, like the high-wire walk in the air, is full of danger. Gloria unfortunately ends up being mugged. She perceives that "[t]here is an inevitability to it. You can feel it coming, even if from behind. A ripple in the air. A pulse in the light. . . . For a split second, when it happens, you're not even in the world. . . . That's how it feels. There goes my life down the street, being carried by a pair of scattering shoes"

(McCann, *Let* 307). The description of Gloria's walk resembles that of the high-wire walker since she is cast in a space unfamiliar and inevitable, hovering near the edge of death. Yet Gloria's situation is the embodiment of the historical heritage of being black. That is, Gloria was reacting not to Claire individually but to the social and historical legacy.

In addition, the flow of affect in Gloria's situation foregrounds the body as the immediate front against the life-threatening social scenario. As the funambulist feels as if he were being carried from one end of the wire to the other, Gloria is pulled forward by a pair of shoes that marks her stigmatized and vulnerable social position. She is in a body, part of which is inherited and beyond her control. This echoes not only the experience of the funambulist but what Lara perceives in the car crash: "Being inside the car, when it clipped the back of the van, it was like being in a body we didn't know. The picture we refuse to see of ourselves. That is not me, that must be somebody else" (McCann, *Let* 115). Like the funambulist and Gloria, Lara feels foreign to her body and to space, attesting to the flow of affect in sense memory.

While revealing the socio-historical relations by engaging unexpected and abrupt sensory reactions, the flow of affect in McCann is incarnated in the intricate relation among the artistic, the historical, and the social. This is epitomized in the character Blaine's film *Calypso*. Blaine's film, a rigorous response to the 1970s, is a sarcastic stricture against the Vietnam War. The film stages the Clock Tower Building. On one hand of the clock, Blaine pastes photographs of Vietnam, while on the other is the picture of a burning monk going around and around the face of the clock (McCann, *Let* 123). The image of the clock juxtaposing the pictures of Vietnam with the burning monk ridicules or even execrates America's socio-political situation in the 1970s, insinuating the futile sacrifice of the Vietnam War. In the film, the photos of Vietnam suggest impractical ideals under the banner of American freedom and democracy; the burning monk intimates inevitable self-sacrifice in pursuing such ideals, insinuating massive casualties in the war as well as the death of the Irish monk who devotes himself to helping the periphery in society. However, what is the difference between these two sacrifices is that the socio-historical connections immanent in the Irish monk's death are not merely the flow of affect but the flow of kindness and love since Jaslyn, the daughter of the prostitute, was brought up by Gloria and Claire—an act of benevolence transcending the border of class and race.

The socio-historical entanglements presented in the artwork have another counterpart in life, exemplified by Lara's marriage. Lara, opposing the Vietnam War, broke up with her boyfriend who joined the military. She then marries Blaine for his anti-war artwork. Yet, seeing Blaine evade responsibility for Corrigan's death in the fatal accident, Lara leaves him and marries Corrigan's brother, Ciaran. The entanglements among the social, the historical, and the artistic in one aspect lead to Lara's decisions in love and marriage. In another, the flow of affect circulating between artistic works and real-life scenarios indicates the constantly dynamic relations among the artistic, the historical, and the social. Furthermore, it is important to note that art does not illuminate profound socio-historical connections but reframes history in different visions and expressions.

What is worth noting is that from the reconfiguration of the sensible and the visible to sense memory and the flow of affect, what McCann foregrounds is less the metaphoric or symbolic meaning of the high-wire walk in particular, but the engagement of the spectator who responds not merely to the performance but to the urban space, revealing McCann's idea of the city as art. This idea stresses the potential power of the city not so much in staging art as in enacting artistic practices that activate the flow of affect and illuminate diverse socio-historical linkages.

V. The Historical Perspective Illuminated by the High-wire Walk

Let the Great World Spin manifests McCann's distinct historical perspective. The high-wire walk encapsulates McCann's historical perspective in Gloria's words—"Sometimes you've got to go up to a very high floor to see what the past has done to the present" (McCann, *Let* 306). The words explicate the anchor of McCann's historical perspective—a panoramic vision. The vision not only overlooks the whole city but provides a vantage point for unimaginable socio-historical connections and the possibility of revisiting history in a new light.

In addition to spatial reconfiguration, McCann's historical vision stresses persistent linkages between past and present as the high-wire walk serves as the juncture between the Vietnam War and the 9/11 attacks. It is like the presence of the past elucidated by a photograph held by Jaslyn, the daughter of the young black prostitute who died in the car accident. Having been abroad for years,

Jaslyn returned to the city in 2006 with the photo of the walk taken on the day of her mother's death. The photo suggests an unspeakable balance since "such beauty had occurred at the same time" (McCann, *Let* 325) as her mother's death. Moreover, the picture makes an image of the inexplicable historical connection as "[a] man high in the air while a plane disappears, it seems, into the edge of the building. One small scrap of history meeting a larger one. As if the walking man were somehow anticipating what would come later. The intrusion of time and history. The collision point of stories" (325). To Jaslyn, the photo of the high-wire walk suggests both the memory of her mother and an intriguing connection with the 9/11 attacks. Such historical connections or associations are telling of the fact that the past is continuously revisited and revised in the present.

The dynamics of the past-present connection are demonstrated by Blaine and Lara's artistic practice. Deliberately leaving their paintings outdoors, Blaine tells Lara, "We allow the present to work on the past. . . . You let the weather become the imaginative force. The real world works on your art. So you give it a new ending" (McCann, *Let* 134). By allowing nature and time to work on their paintings, the present is constantly renewed. It transforms the idea of the painting into an ongoing process of forming and even deteriorating. Placed in the open air, the paintings reveal how the present acts upon the past, forming a dynamic temporal relation. Moreover, the remaking of the past in the present is echoed by the high-wire walk, which evokes and reconfigures memories. Yet, the historical refiguration not only vivifies memories but multiplies historical renditions. The renditions contrast with one another, as Solomon's cynicism toward American values counteracts Claire's seeing the glory of her son's sacrifice.

In addition to the incessant and dynamic relation between past and present, the photo of the high-wire walk deftly illuminates McCann's specific idea concerning the 9/11 attacks. First of all, the photo of the high-wire walk bridges the temporal gap between the 1970s and the aftermath of the attack, implying that the 9/11 attacks can never be reduced to an independent concept or issue. The photo indicates an on-going process whose folds and flows are not only blended into but also renewed in socio-historical connections. What Jaslyn thinks at the end of the novel is suggestive of the future: "We stumble on . . . bring a little noise into the silence, find in others the ongoing of ourselves. It is almost enough. . . . The world spins. We stumble on. It is enough" (McCann,

Let 349). The world spins as the collisions, ruptures, or even extensions intertwine with one another. Most of all, McCann remarkably unveils a new social-historical reading via the aesthetics of art performance. It incarnates the idea of the city as art, mirroring the life of New York in which various socio-historical strata are embedded.

McCann's high-wire walk distinguishes his historical perspective and entails an alternative sense of beauty, featuring his idea of "the city as art." Beauty in McCann is unique to New York, being both accommodating and antagonistic. People tend to feel at home in the city, as Jaslyn observes: "one of the beauties of New York is that you can be from anywhere and within moments of landing it is yours" (McCann, *Let* 332). But being in the city is not an easy process, as Jaslyn recognizes; there are far more stumbles than one can endure. Hence, Gloria says, "The only thing worth grieving over . . . was that sometimes there was more beauty in this life than the world could bear" (339). Rather than aesthetic harmony or sensuous pleasure, beauty in McCann rests on how people move on despite the ceaseless confrontations with conflict, danger, and loss.

The ambivalence of the peculiar form of beauty in *Let the Great World Spin* is echoed by tagger artwork in the subway. Like the tightrope walker in the air, the taggers risk their lives. These tags, vitalizing the dark side of the city with colorful graphics on the walls of the tunnels, are made in places full of "the rats, the moles, the grime, the stink, the steel dust . . ." (McCann, *Let* 168). These works are created at the risk of these anonymous taggers' lives if they are hit by trains or electrocuted by thousands of volts. Moreover, the tags are transient and contingent since their visibility depends on the light of the train, which lasts only a few seconds. Echoing the high-wire walk, the tags express a kind of beauty peculiar to the urban space. They reconfigure the sensible amidst risk and danger in propelling the forthcoming possibilities.

VI. Conclusion

McCann's *Let the Great World Spin*, as a post-9/11 novel, is distinct in taking the artistic performance, the tight-rope walk, as its axis to spin a story. The high-wire walk, a kind of art performance, visualizes an alternative historical perspective, manifesting intricate socio-historical connections and dynamic relations between the past and the present. Different from the conventional walk in the cityscape, the performance constitutes the idea of "the

city as art.” It intriguingly displays how art performance evokes memories of the past, unveiling complex social and historical strata underlying urban space. Prominently, McCann’s historical perspective suggests a peculiar sense of beauty that is more than an anchor of redemption; it not only manifests persistent socio-historical connections and revisions but demonstrates an impetus to move on in the “spinning world.” Rather than depicting grave distress, disorientation, and displacement, McCann alludes to Petit’s high-wire walk in the 1970s, not merely unfolding an unexpected connection between the Vietnam War and the 9/11 attacks, but also looking upon socio-historical relations as an incessant process of revisiting, revisioning, revising.

McCann innovates literary creation, especially historical narrative, by incorporating various forms of art. The art-featured or art-integrated writing illustrates how such art as high-wire walks, painting, film, and tagging enables different socio-historical linkages and reflections and provides a different vision of history. Art makes McCann’s writing transcend what Malcolm Bradbury says about fictional writing, which “bear[s] on polar distinctions . . . on the one hand, the novel’s propensity toward realism, social documentation and interrelation with historical events and movements, and on the other with its propensity toward form, fictionality, and reflexive self-examination” (8). In McCann, content and form are compellingly entwined with the inscription of art. On the other hand, the integration of art can be regarded as a form of counter-narrative as was proposed by Don DeLillo in relating the otherwise unspeakable or inexpressible historical narrative amidst the ruins of the 9/11 attacks.

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