

On Certainly the Toughest Ultramarathon of Your Life (2015) and Hand-In-Hand (2016)

Script for presentation by Dr Kai Syng Tan 2016 November

RUN! RUN! RUN! Biennale 2016 #r3fest Leeds Leg: *How does running (dis)connect people across borders?* November 21 seminar Leeds College of Art www.kaisyngtan.com/r3fest



Fancy running after a moving truck? What about taking things to the 'next level', by climbing over a £1.9 million four-meter wall, before you hit the road – and run the possibility of being run over? Intrigued? Then sign up for the toughest race on earth. No, I am not referring to the latest attractions of the endurance event, Tough Mudder. I'm talking about perilous journeys made by **people running away from persecution** to make a run for better lives.

Last summer, I made a drawing to 'draw out' the irony -- between the gruelling (and exorbitant) journeys that migrants were undertaking to seek asylum in Europe, with gruelling (and exorbitant) endurance races that niche but growing groups of people amidst the running/fitness boom chase in the name of fitness, adventure and/or self-fulfilment. As if a grotesque board game, *Certainly the Toughest UltraMarathon of Your Life* depicts 'escapees' of Europe heading for the 'exotic' south, along the way conquering natural and/or manmade obstacles with their heroic prowess and neoliberal energy packs of time and money (with added protein — shake well before use). Through the work, I wanted to open up a critical space to ask: freedom of movement may be a human right, but in a world that is in motion and commotion, what does it mean to be an exile and what does it mean to be 'on the run'? With the impending erection of new walls in Calais, Mexico, not to mention many more invisible, and hence more insidious, walls being built, and elsewhere, what are the ways in which running could be mobilised as a metaphor, methodology and material to think about how we move about as migrants, travellers, as nomads, or digital nomads.

I am not, and cannot be, exonerated from this process of inquiry. Hence the 'high-vis' palette, the decorative poses and posturing (download royalty-free from the internet!), the in-your-face-ness. What are my own hypocrisies as an artist and academic, who has the choice, -- and privilege -- to run, to live her life on the run, and to appropriate running in her work? This discourse necessarily involves thinking about how other people use running - -which is one of the reasons behind this Biennale, and how it has been put together... which is another story...

So that's the first work I am sharing. I shall now run through very quickly another work, a short film which is 2minutes long. The film asks: *Given this post-referendum (and now Trumpist? Trumpian?) and divided world, what are the ways in which the individual could activate their body (and mind) in motion to create artistic interventions to connect or to RE connect with people around us?*

The film draws on a participatory work which was first commissioned over summer this year for a street festival in France that marked the beginnings of the French revolution. Called *Hand-in-Hand*, I tethered people together with a ribbon while they ran. The 'rule' was that people had to be tethered to a stranger and, while doing so, engage in a conversation about their respective

dreams for the future.

The work draws on my research on critical disability. I learnt about how blind runners run, which is by tethering themselves to a guide. The aesthetics of the tether was a response to how asylum seekers in Cardiff were made to wear red wristbands to gain access to food rations. While the work follows in the footsteps of the Situationists' call for the revolution of everyday life, and in how it is an attempt of a *detournement* or hijack of existing power structures. The low-key, mundane, approach of the work itself was inspired by the Chinese Daoist notion of 'gentle anarchism'. The film itself is quite intense, rather like a mad sprint or an enactment of the madness that was this summer. or indeed the year 2016.

Don't blink!