

## LIFE ON THE RUN! RUN! RUN!

Kai Syng Tan June 2015 UK

Kai's new work performance-lecture explores running as a critical and creative strategy for the 21st contemporary individual, with a focus on the physical and poetic processes of 'being on the run'.



This document contains the **first draft** for a spoken text that is part of a performance-lecture which also consists of a Prezi <https://prezi.com/tjlcxix-w949q/life-on-the-run-run-run-brick-lane-gallery-premiere-2015-june-20-commissioned-by-singapore-tourism-boardexparte/>. Text in [square brackets and highlighted in yellow] denotes corresponding images, image credits, references, etc. The performance lasts approximately 25-30 minutes. Text in caps indicate emphasis.

*Life on the RUN! RUN! RUN!* premiered on 2015 JUNE 20 Saturday 17:00hrs-17:30hrs at an exhibition *EXPARTE* at the Brick Lane Gallery London UK. Curated by Annie Kwan, *EXPARTE* was part of *Inside Out* organised by Singapore Tourism, which is part of SG50, a year-long celebration of Singapore's 50-years of independence.

Drawing on the traditions of the performance-lecture (Walid Raad/Atlas Group) and cine-essay (Chris Marker, Agne Varda), Kai's brand of performance-lectures are critical modes of inquiry in which a highly-collaged set of moving images run hand-in-hand with a scripted spoken text which is densely-littered with running-related metaphors. Sound and image dance and battle with each other, enacting the exuberance of running, yet also raising questions about academic and artistic conventions of knowledge production.

### ENTRY

**Do you RUN?** Yes? So do five hundred twenty two thousand eight hundred and thirty nine others who do so regularly in Singapore. [according to Sport Singapore: 522,840 (2011) run out of population of 5,399,000 (2013); also ranked most popular sport etc]

**Do you LIVE LIFE ON THE RUN?** If you do, you are 1 in a million, or rather, one out of 230 million throughout the world who lives outside the country they were born. [Amnesty International]

### QUESTIONS

**My questions today are:** what COULD it MEAN when you say you 'LIVE LIFE on the RUN' – either by choice or by force? What does it mean to be a political, digital OR existential ex-

ile today? WHAT are the POSSIBLE ways in which RUNNING may be ACTIVATED as a critical and creative 'app', tool or toolkit, if you like, in this ADVENTURE?

**Unfortunately, I was running slightly late this morning.** Hence, I've forgotten to pack my answers into my backpack. I've got my notes and sketches though, but I didn't have a stapler so my perfect little linear, watertight tale has vanished. So this will have to be sketchy, consisting of bits and pieces, fragments, scraps. There will, therefore, be plenty of JUMP CUTS and loose ends. Just as well that we are travelling light, so that we will RUN to all corners of the world across different timezones and RUN into a colourful travelling troupe of itinerant characters all over the world, past and present...

### LOOSE END 1 (IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER)

**For the last 50 years, the world has been experiencing a 'running boom'.** In England, at least 2 million people run regularly [Sport England 2014]. If you bundle several European countries together, the figure comes to 80 million. [The 2009 Asics Reasons to Run Survey ([http://www.everythingaboutrunning.asics.eu/eu\\_eu/introduction/](http://www.everythingaboutrunning.asics.eu/eu_eu/introduction/)) Great Britain, France, Italy, Spain, The Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany] Each day, there is a marathon held SOMEWHERE on earth.

### LOOSE END 2

**'Man's unhappiness springs from [...] his incapacity to stay quietly in one room'.** These are the words of the French mathematician Pascal [(1999, Thought 132) *Pensées and Other Writings*], who adds that human beings' nature 'consists in motion; complete rest is death' [(1999, Thought 142)].

### LOOSE END 3

2000 years before Pascal, **another man describes human beings as 'soft and nimble when living, but firm and rigid when dead.'** [Lao Zi, Chapter 76] In other words, stagnancy is death, movement is life. And did he WALK the talk - literally. Feeling 'disgusted' by the 'worsening conditions' brought about by the corrupt government at the time, he quit his civil servant job in protest, and led a life on the run. [(Lee et al. 1994, p.89).]

### LOOSE END 4

For some people, running is not just for health and fitness. **They run, for their lives, literally.** [Calais, incriminating picture and headline from *Daily Mail*] Here, people are RUNNING AFTER moving trucks in the effort to MAKE A RUN for A NEW LIFE.

(If you thought that the headline is *interesting*, the readers' comments are even more priceless.) [2014 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3006989/Calais-crisis-Illegal-im->

migrants-reach-port-NO-border-checks-start-targeting-cars-caravans-Britain.html#ixz-z3cxZtd2XD]

Beyond Calais, running can be a matter of life, and possibly death, for yet others. [2014 Photograph: Eric Gay/AP Guardian <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/09/central-america-child-migrants-us-border-crisis>; 2014 U.S. Border Patrol agents chase undocumented immigrants through the countryside near Falfurrias, Texas on July 22, 2014. John Moore Getty images <http://www.chron.com/news/nation-world/article/New-DHS-rules-show-who-is-at-the-top-of-the-5914247.php#photo-6960940>] So COMMON are the scenes of ‘aliens’ RUNNING AWAY from the law, that signs are put up to warn drivers against RUNNING OVER escapees. You can only guess that if one is willing to risk life and limb, what one is running away from can only be much worse. Yet, as we all know, NEW sets of problems awaits you at your new ‘HOME’ in your new lives [images of East London; 1978 march against National Front].

## LOOSE END 5

For one traveller, whose name is ‘Lao Zi’, it seems that the moving about, the NOT staying put in a room alone, triggered something off in his thinking, because, WHILE he was ON THE ROAD, **he spewed out a bunch of cracking ideas**. For instance, he thought of how every part of the human body could be mapped with the world, so that each individual is directly connected to it, that we are an actor, an agent, that we have a direct bearing on what happens around us. [body is world, world is body. Kohn, Schipper et al] Lao Zi also conceived a framework [wuwei] that is NOT ruled by reason, but a ‘playful freedom’ (Girardot 2009b, p.210) charged with ‘gentle anarchism’ [(Clarke 2000, p.x)] Although a fully-grown man with a chin full of beard, Lao Zi speaks of himself as being ‘like a child’, ‘restless as if homeless, ‘insatiable’, mixed up, silly, foolish, crude [(Chapter 20)]. At the same time, the philosopher is ALSO pragmatic, and isn’t precious about things. He renders the world as dynamic and pluralistic, and consisting of a metaphorical ‘10,000’ things [(Miller 2003, p.46)]. It is hence not at all surprising, that his philosophy was NOT written as COMMANDMENTS, and was, instead, OPEN, LOOSE AND VERY SKETCHY -- at best! In the place of lofty names, he simply calls his approach ‘way’ – *dao*. It’s just as well, since the Chinese character for way is made up of two radicals: that of the human head, and the motion verb of the feet and footprints [(Keelan 1967, p.22)]. While it’s literal meaning refers to ‘way’ or ‘road’, its also denotes ‘doctrine’ and ‘discourse’ [(Hansen 1996)] Furthermore, the Old Child insists that HIS discourse was SIMPLY ONE synthesis, ONE way, that there are ‘10,000 gates’, and it is up to us ‘each of us to find our own’ [(Schipper 1994, p.158)]. Even then, there is ‘more than one way to the top of the mountain’, and ‘more than one mountaintop’ [(Pas 2006, p.48)].

## LOOSE END 6

**What are the ways to get to the mountaintop?** If there’s no cablecar, I’ll take FLYING. After all, human beings have ALWAYS been MAD about flying [Icarus, Leonardo, and the Wright Brothers et al] – and we REMAIN MAD about flying! [Ryanair etc budget airlines]. Alternatively we could TAKE THE PLUNGE, and LEAP into the rabbit hole [with Alice in

*Wonderland*, or Richard Mayhew through the gap at the underground station into ‘London Below’ in Neil Gaiman’s 1996 urban fantasy *Neverwhere*.] Flying and jumping evoke transcendence and a sense of romantic freedom, as reiterated in expressions like ‘flight of fancy’ and ‘leap of faith’.

For those who prefer something more down to earth, you may JUMP on your BIKE [Jeffrey Shaw’s *LEGIBLE CITY*; which my Prezi concept maps in a way pay homage to], because ‘cycling IS the PERFECT expression of man and machine working in union to negotiate time and space’ [(Brown 2009)]. And when the spirits are low, go for a spin [‘When the spirits are low, when the day appears dark, when work becomes monotonous, when hope hardly seems worth having, just mount a bicycle and go out for a spin down the road, without thought on anything but the ride you are taking.’—Arthur Conan Doyle 1896.] You will just need to WATCH OUT for the other MAD road-users.

However, we HAVE ‘walked and swum long before we rode or flew’, says traveller Bruce Chatwin [1996]. Indeed, water bears rich spiritual and poetic significance [baptism, birth, and cleansing and so on; Byron, *Waterlog*’s Roger Deakin et al], although at FIVE POUNDS per swim at my local, it DOES PUSH me OVER the edge [Leeds University Sports Centre, The Edge].

OBVIOUSLY we COULD ALWAYS WALK - but it’s an obvious, tired, and WELL-TRODDEN PATH. [Usual suspects: Jesus, Basho, flaneur, Francis Alys, Richard Long etc.]

## LOOSE END 7

I picked up running 6 years ago [2009 London]. Well, I say ‘run’, though I’m so slow and wonky that **the word ‘jog’ would have been more fitting.**

**But I like ‘run’.** And with *eighty-one* definitions running across 14 pages in the Oxford English Dictionary, running has mileage [(Simpson & Weiner 1989, vols.XVI, p. 250–264)]. Apart from ‘moving at a speed faster than walking’, which is its most basic definition, running refers to moving about ‘freely, without being restrained or checked in any way’ [(Simpson & Weiner 1989, vols.XVI, pp. 250–252)], as well as a ‘(hurried) travelling or going about, especially to distant places’ and ‘to take a (hurried) journey for the purpose of making a short stay at or visit to a place’. Clearly, running gives jogging a fabulous run for its money. It WORKS not just as an exercise or sport, but as an idiomatic expression; not just as a noun or an abstract concept, but as a verb an action, something YOU can actually DO, as something WITHIN GRASP. In other words, ACTIVATING running BOTH as a poetic and physical process, you MAY on the one hand, have your feet on the ground yet, on the other, stick your heads in blue skies,

## LOOSE END 8

**‘Evolution intended us to be travellers’, says Bruce Chatwin, a die-hard Romantic.** We are ‘seasonal animals’ with built-in satnavs and a migratory drive. Just like homing pi-

geons and other migratory animals, human beings have biological mechanisms which correspond to the passage of celestial bodies [(1996, pp.12–110)].

It was when we ended our nomadic lifestyle and became pastoral, that such concepts as ‘stock’, ‘capital’ and ‘sterling’ were invented. This self-imposed immobility, or paralysis – or ‘settling down’, if that sound too harsh for you – has made us restless, ‘mad’ and ‘tortured’. We sought outlets in ‘violence, greed, status-seeking or a mania for the new’, but our ‘fatal yearning for increase’ led to fights and wars.

The remedy, says Chatwin, is travelling. Himself an itinerant, Chatwin argues that travelling can enable our mind to be ‘constantly stimulated by observing new and unknown things’. Fresh sensations, new emotions, the random and unknown can challenge us, disrupting our assumptions and received thinking.

‘Travel does not merely broaden the mind. it MAKES the mind’, he says. Travelling, we fulfill our innate need ‘for journeys of mind and body’. ‘Without change’, our ‘brains and bodies rot’ [(1996, pp.100–106)]. I told you Chatwin was a Romantic. And the TITLE of his essay in which he says this? ‘It’s a Nomad, *Nomad World*’, in a book entitled *Anatomy of Restlessness*.

## LOOSE END 9

Today, wireless internet has freed us from our desktops -- remember those? -- AND from our desks, as well as being indoors in our proverbial room. **Armed with our smart mobile gadgets, we have become location-independent** and can be online virtually anytime and anywhere, and, by extension, with the new ability to work — and live — where we wish. The PORTABILITY of the internet has re-configured us not just as nomads but *digital* nomads. In this ‘post-desktop’ era [(Borchers 2002)], we can ROAM [‘move from one access point coverage area to another without interruption in service or loss in connectivity’ (Webopedia Computer Dictionary 2012)] and go where we please, armed with our digital gadgets that are ACTIVATED by the digits of our fingers, and carried by the DIGITS of our feet [‘Digital’ nomad: ‘digit’: parts of data in computers (Simpson & Weiner 1989, vol.IV p.653); 17th century reference: ‘one of the five terminal division of the hand or foot; a finger or a toe’.] In other words, we can become humanoid versions of a smart, mobile device ourselves.

## LOOSE END 10

‘Having the right to move means that you have the CHOICE, possibility, and right to move from A to B at any time and for any reason’ [Right to Movement website]. Right to Movement marathon is the name of an annual marathon that takes place in Palestine, thus called because movement IS a human right [Article 13 of the UN Human Rights Charter]. The marathon ‘tells a different story of Palestine’, A NEW story, or rather, NEW STORIES, that differ from the tired ones regurgitated on mainstream media. It functions as a “showcase of the different sides of Palestinian everyday life”, as runners run ‘from the Church of Nativity, along the Wall [<http://pages.ucsd.edu/~gfields/PalestinePhotos/> Gary



Fields], through two refugee camps and turnaround point in a checkpoint' [Olivier Fitoussi's images <http://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-arrests-palestinian-carrying-two-bombs-at-checkpoint-south-of-nablus/>].

## LOOSE END 11

Indeed, RUNNING CAN be an expression of freedom. When you run, you are announcing that YOU are in charge of your own body your own environment, your own fate. You're outdoors, ACTIVE, not submissive, not domesticated. Run, and you're sticking 2 fingers – and ten sweaty toes up – at the BY-standers watching from the SIDE-lines. Every step you take shouts: 'I OWN this place'. Running, you are ACTIVATING your body as the most rudimentary and potentially most powerful SIGHT / SITE of protest. HUFF and PUFF. KICK your legs high. CALL everything into question [(Situationists, psychogeography)]. Make a revolution of everyday life. ACTIVATE RUNNING as a playful constructive behaviour for revolt, as your political MOVEMENT, your GENTLE anarchy, your tool of resistance. RUN your own STATE, your state of mind, your state of being. REFUSE to TOE THE PARTY LINE. RUN AGAINST being run. Running is your PLACARD to scream 'Stop STEPPING INTO my personal world! Stop running my life!

## LOOSE END 12

Although NOT AS STRIKING [self-immolation], less monumental [hunger strike] and not as VISUALLY-ARRESTING as other forms of body protests [Suffragettes; Femen] – and sometimes, NOT moving may EXPRESS your POSITION more ELOQUENTLY! [I am thinking of the eloquent gesture of Erdem Gunduz, the 'Taksim Square standing man'] ['What do YOU STAND FOR'; 'making a stand'; what's your stance; under-stand; drawing attention by making things come to a standstill.] [Richard Seymour *Guardian* 2014: 'The "standing man" exemplifies some features of the tradition of passive resistance. First, the ability to meet overpowering physical force with a determined, but passive, feat of defiance has sometimes been the death knell of recalcitrant regimes, whether it is the Shah or Marcos – because it points to resources that the protesters have which can overwhelm the state's repressive capacities. Second, passive resistance is not merely symbolic; it confuses and derails the calculations of the rulers. When the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia, part of the resistance involved painting over street signs and mysteriously shutting off infrastructure. Gunduz's protest was both an affront and a question for the authorities: beat him? Why? He's just standing there. Leave him alone? Then he wins, doesn't he?'] — **running's ubiquity and BANALITY MAY PREVENT** you from a RUN IN with the police (especially if it's a city in which protests are OUTLAWED [Singapore]) THUS making it a POTENTIALLY POWERFUL PERSONAL AND POLITICAL, PERFORMANCE of your AUTONOMY. Demanding NO skill whatsoever or any special equipment — even shoes are optional — running is as 'PURE' as it gets.

## LOOSE END 13

Before I could run [ISLANDHOPPING: Japan UK USA Singapore], I skipped [LONDON 1994-1995], walked, quite a lot [ALL CHANGE 1998!!! and other LONDON, CHICAGO artworks] swam [Chlorine Addiction 2000; Now/Here/Where at Guangzhou Triennale], drowned [The Amazing Never-ending Underwater Adventures! 2009- permanent public ex-

hibition], hopped [ISLANDHOPPING 2002-2005], made revolutions [A Fool on a Stool ... 2008 commission] and so on. The physicality, AND POETICS, of these movements functioned as CRITICAL TOOLS for me to FIGURE OUT, WORK OUT, to WORK THROUGH, work WITH, or to INTERROGATE the world around me.

## LOOSE END 14

Since 2009, MY way to MY 'mountaintop' has been by running. With footsteps and heart that are light. A brand of running that is bonkers. Childish. Giddy. Cheeky. Running that is playful yet pungent. Poetic yet practical. Personal yet political. Smart and smarting. Intellectual yet intuitive. Idealistic yet practice-related. Running which is NOT just about running away but RUNNING AGAINST. Fight, not flight. Running as an attitude, a state, a process of being. A way to orientate and re-orientate you and your world. A way of life. Of running into things un-known. To navigate. To negotiate. Running into new worlds [digital] and old problems [Palestine]. Running as your satnav, your guide and mis-guide. To shake things up. To Trouble. To have no place to call 'home'. To have many places to call home. Running, so as to be immersed. To be detached. To be jolted out of comfort zones. Running, to revolutionise your world. One step. At a time. To in-form. Trans-form. Re-view. Re-new. To play. To shift. To not take things lying down. To not sit and wait. To get on your feet. To act. To activate. To give things a go. A good go. To get mobilised. To move around the world. And worlds. To make journeys of the mind and body. To get lost. To find. To find other mountaintops. To not find any. To get side-tracked. To forget the questions you were asking. To formulate new questions. To create and experience euphoric adventures. To create and experience rubbish adventures. To create and experience nomad, nomad adventures.

## LOOSE END 15

My next nomad, nomad adventure [2016-2018] is called *Bodies on the RUN! RUN! RUN!*, which explores the poetics of physical, imaginative and virtual movements via running, with a focus on the processes of 'being on the run'. The work takes the form of a film, book and website and will be created in situ at locations exotic and mundane, actual and virtual. I travel around the world to chat with people who move or do not move, either by choice or coercion, and, where possible, while running with them. Along the way, I perform interventions that contemplate the states of 'homelessness' and 'statelessness' while running on the spot along liminal sites.

*BODIES* aims to reflect our age of mobility, demonstrating what has been called 'the institutional, geopolitical and technological transformations that have brought about an increase in the magnitude and speed of the circulation of people, objects and information' [Urry]. Along the way, I hope to run into colourful troupes of characters who become my travelling companions.

You, too, can be my travelling companion on this GRAND, and possibly also, sometimes, BLAND, adventure.

## IN-CONCLUSION

**Here we are at the finishing line of today's talk.** I have no conclusion to JUMP to. In any case, I have RUN out of time.

THANK YOU very much indeed.