

running into each other: run! run! run! a festival and a collaboration

cultural geographies

1–6

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abstract

artists and geographers frequently work together. the following essay explores one such on-going collaboration. centering on a festival organized by an artist and a geographer, it explores the productive antagonisms that working through and along disciplinary borders produces.

keywords

art, collaboration, interdisciplinarity, performance, running, productive antagonism

I

this is a story about an artist. and a geographer. the artist made films, installations, performances. her work was shown around the world. japan. australia. germany. finland. america. russia. england. critics praised her for her “sardonic humour”, her “sharp intelligence.”¹ she’d been named one of singapore’s most exciting young artists. “a media artist to look out for.”² but for all that success. all that attention. she was kind of tired of the world of art. its seriousness. its self-importance. its pretension. its pomposity. that it couldn’t take a joke. or that it could only take a joke if it was a serious joke. a weighty nudge nudge wink wink super clever self-referential you probably don’t get this kind of joke. the geographer didn’t want to be an artist. and really he wasn’t all that interested in art. he was happy enough being what he was: a geographer. sure when he’d been younger he’d tried other things. he briefly called himself an urbanist, flirted with sociology, worried that perhaps the world needed more art. that was a long time ago. now he owned a collection of jumpers.³ sometimes wore merrell’s. was thinking about a beard. and now and again produced a more or less readable research paper. of course no-one read them. but that wasn’t the point. the point was to keep the head of department happy. to keep the dean happy. to keep the provost happy. to keep getting paid. to keep him and the family comfortably in jumpers.

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both the artist and the geographer, however, were a little obsessed by running. jogging. sprinting. running up hills and mountains. through cities. in gyms. to catch buses. old people running. children running. running through imaginary places. all kinds of running. And that was the one thing they had in common.⁴ that is why the artist got talking to the geographer. that is why the geographer listened to the artist. was enthused by the artist.⁵ and that is how they came to put on a festival together. a festival of art and research on running. so this is a story about an artist and a geographer. but it's also a story about a festival. a story about working together. and a story about exploring an obsession.⁶

II

okay. that's not quite right. it wasn't that they were only obsessed with running. and it wasn't that they were just sick of or disinterested in art. or not quite. the festival was part of an intuition that thinking with, working with, experimenting with running, could take both the artist and the geographer interesting places. and this was also an intuition about art and an intuition about geography. that running took art somewhere challenging.⁷ that thinking about and working with running took geography somewhere worth travelling.⁸ more than that. working together the artist and geographer could some how - they didn't quite know exactly in what way - animate, energize, provoke, spark their own work. and this working together might convince more people, artists, geographers, social scientists that, yeah, actually running was something worth thinking about, worth working with.

to think intuitively is, of course, to risk making a fool of oneself. and if foolish-ness is not something social scientists often embrace, foolish though they often are, playing the fool is something that other traditions of thinking know to value. daoism for example. doatist thought works through drawing out correlations, associations. it skips between analogies, plays with words, explores resonances. it is a way of thinking that is pungent. poetic. inventive. willfully childish. open. foolish even, when it needs to be.⁹ this was a way of working that the artist had explored in her art. it is a way of thinking that has all sorts of resonances with other perhaps more well known modes of thinking from the worlds of both the arts and the social sciences. think of the surrealists.¹⁰ the situationists at their more playful.¹¹ certain strands of post-structuralist thinking and speculative philosophy.¹² the bastard traditions of conceptual art.¹³ running with this way of thinking, the artist and the geographer wondered, why not think of running as itself a kind of running together? after all isn't one meaning of run 'to unite' or to 'combine'? and the phrase 'run into' which means both to 'coalesce with' as well as 'to dash into or collide with, especially by accident' was suggestive of the kind of rigorous serendipity they were after.¹⁴ like the running ambassadors in 14th century europe, who carried messages from town to town couldn't they act as messengers across the many different fields and disciplines working with running?¹⁵

III

so run! run! run! an international festival of running 1.0 was a collision of different ways of working with running. there were plenty of artists. after all one thing the artist wanted to do through the festival was to try and animate running as a form of artistic practice. to show the ways running could be mobilized as a site and object for art. but there were also anthropologists, biologists, geographers, film makers, philosophers, historians, medical doctors, activists, social entrepreneurs and people who simply ran. and the artists worked across a range of disciplinary forms. dance. performance. photography. painting. it was a piling up of all sorts of different things running might be. a performance. an immersion. a scarring. a coming together. a presencing. an instrument. an

experiment. a meditation. an evolutionary journey. a witnessing. a moment in a landscape. a history. a trace on a map. a movement to exhaustion.

this piling up was not meant to produce some kind of synthesis. a unified transdisciplinary field of running research and practice.¹⁶ in curating the spaces of run! run! run! - both the three exhibition spaces with the slade research centre in central london where the festival was held, and the website which collected together the contributions to the festival - the artist and geographer tried to engineer something more modest. they hoped to create a field of productive antagonisms (figure 1).¹⁷

the festival was imagined as a series of meetings where things might end up running off together. but equally well might highlight deep fissures of difference. senses of strangeness and incommensurability. while a social scientist spoke of the web of practices that draw some people into running indoors on treadmills, a performance artist made a gym treadmill the centre piece for a performance exploring the physicality of running as escape. another artist worked the rhythms of a treadmill runner's heart beat into a kinetic sound sculpture. as biologists spoke of the evolutionary distinctiveness of the human capacity to run efficiently for long distances, a cultural geographer told of his running body's sensuous engagement with the landscapes he traversed along with the tracks and scars this had left on his body; together sketching deeply layered topographies of bone, ligament, muscle, skin and experience. at the same time a performance artist spoke of the power of mass running events to draw people together in moments of collective effort, collective endurance, the short documentary film the runners spoke to the often rich inner-life bound up with running. jeremy bentham's early nineteenth century utilitarian daily "pre-prandial circumgyrations" in london's st james park, described by a historian, resonated with the inventive playfulness of good gym where runners combine exercise with helpful community activities - being 'coached' by a lonely elderly neighborhood, carrying out chores in community gardens and public parks, as part of their weekly workouts.¹⁸

IV

if the artist and geographer had to theorize what they were trying to do within run! run! run! an international festival of running 1.0 it was to provide a kind of "potential space." a "between

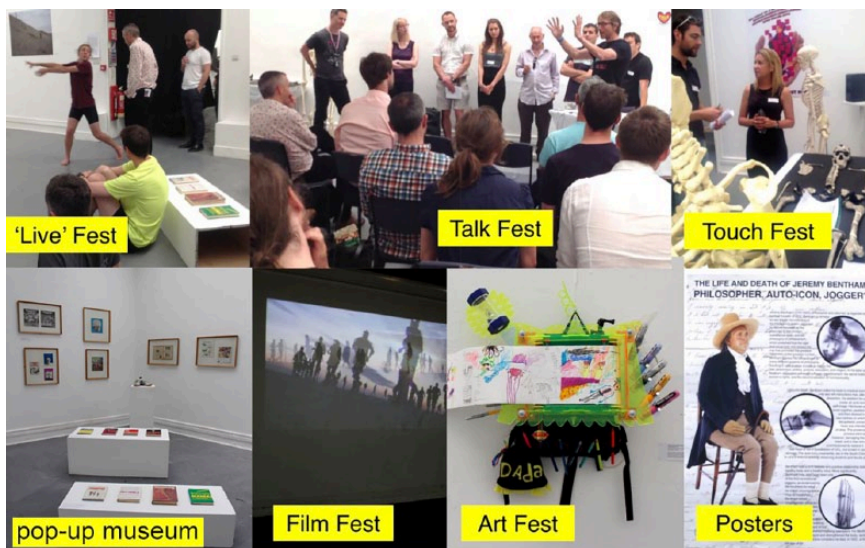


Figure 1. live fest, talk fest, touch fest, pop up museum, film fest, art fest, poster fest.

space.”¹⁹ a place where the usual norms of disciplinary practice were temporarily suspended. for this mixing to work required a certain amount of artistry. it had to be pieced together. assembled. curated. and it also rested on a very basic sense of trust. a sense that even if there wasn't anything obviously in common with the different ways participants approached running that there was the potentiality that suggestive similarities and points of connection might become evident. creativity requires a certain playful suspension of critical disbelief. a willingness to explore, experiment, mess around with unexpected and indeed unlikely lines of connection and influence. this is something artists are very skilled at. making good art involves a willingness to practice a bit of ill-discipline. a willingness to run across the boundaries that separate disciplines. to see what happens these boundaries are over run, out run, re-routed. and artists certainly have more license to play the fool than do social scientists. but an openness to unlikely connections, a willingness to be a little foolish, to run down unlikely paths is something social scientists, human geographers among them, could do well to learn to cultivate. it is often where antagonistic disciplinary knowledges rub up against each other where the most fertile paths are to be found.

V

at the end of run! run! run! an international festival of running 1.0 there was no grand synthesis, no denouement. instead the artist and the geographer found themselves thinking about running itself as a kind of critical tool. developing the ethos of the festival and led by the artist they founded run! run! run! international body of research. r3 international body of research investigates and promotes the ways running can be activated as a creative app enabling ways to re-imagine how we engage with the world. situated within and beyond the artistic and academic worlds, we organize all kinds of exercises and interventions that are public- and world-facing, serious, rigorous and disruptive — as they are light-footed, light-hearted, useless and plain bonkers. come run with us.²⁰

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Notes

1. The quote is from the Singaporean theatre director Keng Sen Ong. See kaisyngtan.com/portfolio/life-on-the-run/
2. The quote is from the Dutch curator Johan Pijnappel.
3. If you don't believe us, have a look at the following: www.youtube.com/watch?v=cM1yMtiSDdd124
4. The artist had been exploring running and other forms of physicality in her art works for more than a decade. A portfolio of her work can be found at kaisyngtan.com. The geographer has, amongst other things, been working on a history of aerobic fitness told through focusing on the practice of running, A. Latham, 'The history of a habit: jogging as a palliative to sedentariness in 1960s America', *Cultural Geographies*, 22(1), 2015, pp. 103-26.
5. Enthusiasm is not a force to be discounted in the arts, social sciences or elsewhere. A fact recognised on recent work within cultural geography, R. Craggs, H. Geoghegan, & H. Neate, 'Architectural enthusiasm: visiting buildings with the Twentieth Century Society', *Environment and Planning D: Society and*

- Space*, 31(5), 2013, pp. 879-896; H. Geoghegan, 'A new pattern for historical geography: Working with enthusiast communities and public history,' *Journal of Historical Geography*, 46, 2014, pp. 105-107; H. Hawkins, *For Creative Geographies: Geography, Visual Arts and the Making of Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2013).
6. There is, of course, a vital and growing body of collaborative work between artists and geographers. Examples include, T. Butler and G. Miller, 'Cultural geographies in practice: Linked: a landmark in sound, a public walk of art', *Cultural Geographies*, 12(1), 2005, pp. 77-88; K. Foster and H. Lorimer, 'Cultural geographies in practice: some reflections on art-geography as collaboration', *Cultural Geographies*, 14(3), 2007, pp. 425-432; Hawkins, *For Creative Geographies*; D. McCormack, *Refrains for Moving Bodies: Experience and Experiment in Affective Spaces* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 2013); E. Roe and M. Buser, 'Becoming ecological citizens: connecting people through performance art, food matter and practices', *Cultural Geographies*, 23(4), 2016, pp. 581-598.
 7. A catalogue of recent creative work involving running might include, M. Creed, *Work Number 850*, Tate Britain, 1 July-16 November 2008; Edensor, T. and H. Lorimer, "'Landscapism" at the speed of light: darkness and illumination in motion', *Geografiska Annaler. Series B: Human Geography*, 97(1), 2015, pp. 1-16; A. Filmer, 'Motion Capture', *Like the Wind*, 7, 2015, pp. 79-80; T. Gardner, *Poverty Creek Journal* (North Adams, MA.: Tupelo Press, 2014); C. McCall, *Work no. 4 (Restraint/Running)*, 2010 – 2014, caralimccall.com/works/work-4; G. Whelan, 'Running Through a Field: Performance and humanness', *Performance Research*, 17(2), 2012, 110-120; J. Quattro, *I Want to Show You More* (New York: grove Press, 2013).
 8. There is a smallish but growing literature within human geography concerned with the practice of recreational running. This includes work from a mobilities framework, S. Cook, J. Shaw, and P. Simpson, 'Jography: exploring meanings, experiences and spatialities of recreational road-running', *Mobilities*, 11(5), 2016, pp. 744-769; from a more-than-representational theory perspective, H. Lorimer, 'Surfaces and slopes', *Performance Research*, 17(2), 2012, pp. 83-86; A. Barnfield, 'Grasping physical exercise through recreational running and non-representational theory: a case study from Sofia, Bulgaria', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 38(7), 2016, pp. 1121-1136; work influenced by feminist geography, J. Little, 'Running, health and the disciplining of women's bodies: the influence of technology and nature', *Health & Place*, 2016, in press, doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2016.11.011; as well as work influenced by practice theory, R. Hitchings and A. Latham, 'Indoor versus outdoor running: understanding how recreational exercise comes to inhabit environments through practitioner talk', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41(4), 2016, pp. 503-514.
 9. For overviews of daoistic thinking see N. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Daoism: The Theme of Chaos*, Revised Edition (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009); and L. Kohn (ed), *Daoism Handbook* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2000). Daoist thinking has of course been of interest to a number of Western thinkers. Heidegger praised it for its poetic force, M. Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1971) p. 92. And Peter Sloterdijk has drawn on daoist thought extensively, perhaps most strikingly in *Eurotaoismus: Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009).
 10. G. Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement* (Chicago: Chicago University, 2002).
 11. D. Pindar, *Visions of the City: Utopianism, Power and Politics in 20th-Century Urbanism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2005); S. Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1998).
 12. M. Doel, *Poststructuralist Geographies: The Diabolical Art of Spatial Science* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); D. McCormack, *Refrains for Moving Bodies*.
 13. See M. Corris (ed), *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
 14. Definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary.
 15. T. Gotaas, *Running: A Global History* (London: Reaktion, 2009).
 16. A. Barry, G. Born and G. Weskalyns Logics of interdisciplinarity, *Economy and Society*, 37(1), 2008, pp. 20-49; G. Born and A. Barry (2010) 'Art-Science: from public understanding to public experiment', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 3(1), 2010, pp. 203-119.
 17. Barry et al., 'Logics of interdisciplinarity', p. 29.

18. GoodGym is a social enterprise founded by Ivo Gormley. The basic idea is that exercising in gyms is a tremendous waste of energy to little social purpose. Good Gym harnesses the physical effort of those wanting to exercise for wider social goals. Members combine runs with social visits to their 'coach' - a socially isolated elderly person. They also undertake group runs that include a community project such as helping at a community garden or allotment.
19. D. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971); A. Latham, 'Powers of engagement: on being engaged, being indifferent, and urban life', *Area*, 31(2), 1999, pp. 161-168.
20. Information on the kinds of things RUN! RUN! RUN! International Body of Research gets up to can be found at: <http://kaisyngtan.com/portfolio/manifesto/>. The initial RUN! RUN! RUN! International Festival of Running 1.0 was held in June 2014 in the Slade Art School Research Centre, London, United Kingdom. A overview of the events at the festival can be found at kaisyngtan.com/portfolio/festival/.

Author biographies

Alan Latham is a cultural and urban geographer whose research focuses on sociality, mobility and public-ness. He has published extensively in edited collections and academic journals and is the co-author of *Key Concepts in Urban Geography* and co-editor of *Key Thinkers on Cities*. His work has explored a range of sites in cities as diverse as Auckland, London, New York, Eugene (OR), Berlin, and Champaign-Urbana. He is currently writing a contemporary history of sedentarism and practices of aerobic fitness. He teaches at University College London.

Kai Syng Tan's work sits/slips between discipline/form/conceptual frameworks/ allegiances. Turbocharged by a day-glo palette, hyperactive layering and overblown vocabulary, they have appeared at Documenta, Royal Geographical Society, Guangzhou, MOMA and BBC Radio 3, and are collected by the Museum of London and Fukuoka Art Museum. Currently a Research Fellow at Leeds College of Art, Visiting Fellow at University College London, and Visiting Researcher at King's College London, Kai completed her PhD at the Slade School of Fine Art.