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# HAND-IN-HAND

## ACTIVATING THE BODY IN MOTION TO RE-CONNECT WITH OURSELVES AND OTHERS AMIDST A WORLD IN MOTION AND COMMOTION

Dr Kai Syng Tan FRSA 5 August 2016, English version  
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For Temps, Art et Cartographie: Représenter les populations et les territoires en mouvement  
 (by invitation)



Amidst the unstable world today, how could the individual activate their body in motion to create artistic interventions to map — connect and correlate — with the world, other people and themselves? Drawing on an example of an activity carried out in Grenoble this Summer and running through its sources of inspiration, the essay invites you to create your own artistic interventions. For more images of Hand-in-Hand (France, UK editions), visit [www.kaisyngtan.com/portfolio/handinhand](http://www.kaisyngtan.com/portfolio/handinhand)

## RE-MAPPING

The world and its people are in motion and commotion. UK left the EU. Racism is trendy again (Khaleeli 2016). Common sense has abandoned us (Trump 2016). People were randomly murdered in Nice, Munich, Orlando, Ottawa. More than 4 million Syrian refugees are in exile in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt (Amnesty International 2016).

Amidst this hostile, topsy-turvy reality, how could the individual activate their body in motion to create artistic interventions to *map* — connect, re-connect, and correlate — with the world, other people and themselves?

## HAND IN HAND, GRENOBLE, FRANCE

I tried something out in France in June. I designed ribbons and invited people to tether themselves to strangers, and share their hopes for the future while running. Participants were free to cover 1 metre, 10km, or 100km, or to walk, use a wheelchair or skateboard instead. I wanted to create a celebratory *demonstration* — in both senses of the word — of cooperation, conversation and conviviality.

And what better occasion than a riotous street party attended by 100,000 people founded on the themes of independence and freedom, in cosmopolitan Grenoble. Fete de Tuiles, or Festival of Tiles, is an annual festival that marks the 1788 riot that sparked the French Revolution. I was invited by Florent Cholat, organising committee member and PhD student at the Grenoble Alpes University and the University of Milano-Bicocca. Given this year's theme of 'En marche, la marche, ça marche', Florent curated a 6-hour run, within which I tested my exercise. I distributed ribbons to runners as they traversed the spectacular Cours de la Libération-et-du-Général-de-Gaulle. It sounds and looks simple enough. Yet, when con-joined, everything changes: *how* you move; *where* you move; your empathy for your co-runner. What you see, hear, smell, or run into in the streets becomes heightened when you move about *entangled* with an other, who becomes an extension of your body. This setup allows you to check yourself, too; people who run know that if you panting when you talk while running, you need to slow down. As participants Taoufik Trouissi and Gilles Dubois evaluated, it's 'harder'. To get the hang of it, 'you need to practise', and to negotiate — verbally, or tacitly — with your new friend. They diplomatically concluded that the experience was 'funny'.

I called this work *Hand-in-Hand (Main dans la Main)*.



*Florent Cholat (centre) running while tethered to Richard Wright  
(Taoufik Trouissi and Gilles Dubois are running ahead of them)*

## **MAPPING ART WITH DISABILITY**

*Hand-in-Hand* was inspired by how blind athletes and their guides run. The banality of the setup — two people moving while linked by a pilates band or simply a rope or string — makes it a powerful, paradoxical and *human* statement of vulnerability, trust and togetherness. As *GuideRunning UK*, a website to connect visually-impaired, blind and sighted runners, states, ‘the importance of trust cannot be understated’ (Wheatcroft 2016). It advises beginners to be ‘open to learning and accept your pre-conceptions may be challenged’. Running tethered is probably ‘intimidating for your running partner also — be patient and work together’. Last but not least, whether visually-impaired, blind or guide,

‘PLEASE never forget YOU are the most important person in this team’ (2016).

In other words, *every body* matters.

## MAPPING RUNNING WITH WALKING FORERUNNERS

The work continues on the trajectories opened up by the Situationist International, who called for the ‘revolution of everyday life’ by taking to the streets and inventing mischievous strategies to subvert (‘*détourn*’) the established order (Debord 1995; Ford 2005; Sadler 1999). *Hand-in-Hand* referred to — and aimed to sabotage — a tactic used by a company in Cardiff employed by the UK Home Office on asylum seekers, who had to wear red wristbands to gain access to food (D. Taylor 2016). By utilising something celebratory — in this case customised, red ribbons — I wanted to uproot the ‘handcuffs’ forced upon the asylum seekers. *Hand-in-Hand* thus became a methodology and metaphor to *détourn* something aggressive and antagonistic, into something positive and creative.

## PRODUCTIVE ANTAGONISMS

A term that geographer Dr Alan Latham and I invented to frame our interdisciplinary collaboration exploring running as an arts and humanities discourse is ‘productive antagonisms’ (Latham and Tan 2016, forthcoming) . Writing without capital letters to signify its non-hierarchical nature, we defined the term as providing a ‘potential space’ and ‘between space’,

‘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 [...] there was the potentiality that [suggested] 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. [...] an openness to unlikely connections, a willingness to be a little foolish, to run down unlikely paths is something social scientists [could] cultivate. it is often where antagonistic disciplinary knowledges rub up against each other where the most fertile paths are to be found’ (2016).

Beyond interdisciplinary divisions, the term can be mobilised to think about a mode of working *with* and working *through* difference. Suspended — literally — between two different beings, the ribbon and the interface of *Hand-in-Hand* allowed a ‘playful suspension of critical disbelief’ (and reminiscent of the many dashes that join disparate units of ideas in this essay). Taoufik and Gilles wanted to simply run — no easy feat in itself, considering that there were 6 hours to complete. Yet, they participated in my trial, if only for all of two minutes. The two minutes rested on a ‘sense of trust’ — between Taoufik and Gilles, and between them and myself as the strange artist (and strange visitor

from the UK/Singapore). The experiment revealed that when people are willing to ‘mess around’ — grown men with a shiny party ribbon dangling between them — surprising ‘lines of connection and influence’ may emerge. A passerby whom I invited to run with shared his excitement — and anxieties — about returning to France after working in Africa, as well as the impending arrival of his first child. We carried on chatting for about 10 minutes while jogging, tethered. Ending the session with a handshake, Michel mentions that he may pick up running. Where strangers and strange things ‘rub up against each other’ (even literally, as the ribbon did), we could challenge and learn from one another — and sparks can fly.

## MAPPING WITH STRANGE PHILOSOPHIES AND PRACTICES

The concept of productive antagonisms is a mapping of various concepts and practices from our respective disciplines of geography and fine art — which are themselves hybrid and promiscuous fields to begin with — and beyond.

Something that guides my work is the notion of ‘associative thinking’. Also known as correlative, poetic or analogical thinking (Hall and Ames 1995; Graham 1986), this is a ‘spatial way of thinking’ that map ‘the relationships between things that do not exist in a linear cause-and-effect sequence’ (Miller 2003, 60). Rather than the analytical, rational or abstract, it emphasises the metaphorical, experiential and organic. The Chinese ‘yin-yang’ symbol (circa 14<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.) exemplifies associative thinking — as well as productive antagonisms. What seem oppositional are in fact intertwined in a creative interdependency; without one, the other is left hanging — literally. As represented in the smaller black circle within the white section, and vice versa, each side encapsulates within it its ‘opposite’.

The Chinese Daoists (Taoists) extended this correlative worldview by mapping the human body with the world around us. Each body part has a corresponding part vis-a-vis not only nature and the cosmos, but social and political dimensions. As the philosopher Lao Zi (Lao Tzu) states, in 500 B.C.E.,

‘Through our body, we may contemplate the body. Through our family, we may contemplate the family. Through our hamlet, we may contemplate the hamlet. Through our state, we may contemplate the state. Through our world, we may contemplate the world.’ (Translation from the Chinese by Kai Syng Tan with reference to Lao Tzu & Lau 1963, ch.54)

This ‘world as body, body as world’ dictum (Kohn 1993, 102) powerfully implicates the individual as an active agent who *matters*. It is just as well that the Daoist universe is conceived as one that is in a state of flux: unstable, dynamic and creative (Miller 2003, 46), and that the root word ‘*dao*’ of Daoism correlates movement with thinking. The world-body principle is applied to all aspects of Daoist life, including so-called ‘cultivation

techniques' like *taiji* (*taichi*), which enables the individual to attain a 'harmonisation and synchronisation of all aspects of life with the rhythms of nature' (Pas 2006, 364).

## **(NOT) RUN OF THE MILL**

However, instead of *taiji*, I have translated this body-world ethos into an everyday (loco)motion and popular exercise: running.

Since at least the 1970's, the world has experienced several running booms (Newsholme & Leech 1983, p.vi). Worldwide, a marathon held daily, and Palestine held its first — named Right To Movement — in 2013. Yet, more than a passing fad, human beings have run for 2 million years. Our forerunners ran to hunt for food (Bramble and Lieberman 2004). As children, we ran — until our parents and teachers reprimanded, 'Walk, don't run!'. That the English language is endowed with run-related idioms conjuring freedom and rebellion — *running away*, *running against*, letting your *imagination run riot*, to name a few (Simpson & Weiner 1989, vols.XVI, p. 250–264) — makes running an attractive poetic device, too. The banality — and poetry — of running, how it is 'mundane' and simultaneously 'mythic' (Lorimer 2014) could explain why it has such wide appeal, and why it was this year's theme at *Fete de Tuiles*.

## **HAND-IN-HAND, MANCHESTER**

A month after my Grenoble gig, I re-ran *Hand-in-Hand* at Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, UK. By then, the world had *moved on*, even *further*, faster, madder. What would have traditionally been 'silly season' became 'headline-a-minute': An unelected Prime Minister was in power in the UK. Turkey *purged* its academics. In the name of honour, a female who enjoyed uploading selfies on social media was murdered by her brother (Eitizaz 2016).

Is Summer 2016 the *silliest* of all summers yet?

Adhering to the Daoist rule of flux and transformation, the work, too, *shifted*. Six trainee nurses and a researcher from the nearby hospital and myself were coupled up with the ribbons, and we walked around the nearby park. Nonetheless, with the theme of 'wellbeing in an unwell world' and the use of the same sets of ribbons imprinted with the French words for hand-in-hand — *main dans la main* — a metaphorical ribbon was created between the UK run and its French counterpart.



*Sharing our findings after the walk*

## **NEW MAPPINGS AHEAD**

There may be future editions of *Hand-in-Hand*. I would be keen to run tethered to a Brexiter, and chat about how they want their country ‘back’ because people like myself have been spoiling it.

The point, however, of the work, and this essay, is not to urge you to run, if you don’t. Crawling, using walking sticks or bicycles places your body in motion, too. Neither is the point about becoming artists (if you aren’t), or to force anyone to partake my art (not many do). Instead, it is about opening up a space to talk about other *Hand-in-Hands* out there, and to generate other (better) artistic interventions that map across difference.

In his analysis of post-Brexit Britain, public thinker Matthew Taylor urges a ‘cycle of hope and unity’ in these ‘dark and dangerous times’. We must innovate and find ‘clever, concrete, creative ways of bringing a better more humane future into the here and now’, to battle despair and division (M. Taylor 2016). He ends the article with a bittersweet note: that summer



‘is a hard time to find readers. Maybe I’m writing this post to myself’ (2016).

I *did* read his call for action. I have a suggestion. Perhaps collectively, step by step, *Hand-in-Hand* and other acts of *détournement* involving our bodies as tools for *demonstration* — everyday, playful and banal as they are — could make a contribution to the production of hope and unity in response to the tumultuous world. Perhaps we could re-channel the pervasive antagonism into something creative, and not let things come to standstill or take things lying down.

Naïve, idealistic and silly as they may sound, such responses follow in the footsteps of the Situationists and others before and after them, such as the Dadaists, Duchamp, Vienna Actionists and Fluxus (and, beyond visual art, punk, Soviet montage and the satirical tradition of literature, and so on). I will leave it to others to debate about and quantify the impact of art beyond the art world (see for instance Plant 1992; Ensminger 2016; Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009), but I shall end with my invitations. Let us embrace flux. Let us invent *movements* to mock and knock the toxic status quo. Let us celebrate the right to movement. Let us discover what happens when boundaries are over run, out run, re-routed. Let us be open to new mappings. Let us be willing to be silly, to fight silliness. Let us run into difference. Let us run — literally, metaphorically, vicariously — hand-in-hand.

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## **ABOUT KAI**

Kai is an artist, visual director, researcher, advisor, mongrel and migrant. Her installation, films, performances, maps and text are bonkers as they are serious. They have toured 450 exhibitions/conferences in 50 cities, including dOCUMENTA; Biennale of Sydney and Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting, at sites including Dom Muzyki, MOMA and ZKM. Accolades include San Francisco International Film Festival Golden Gate Award, Artangle Open 100, BBC/AHRC New Generation Thinkers (finalist) and a Japan Foundation artist-in-residency award. Her works are collected by the Museum of London, Wellcome Trust and Fukuoka Art Museum.

Kai is Director of RUN! RUN! RUN! International Body for Running (Co-director: Dr Alan Latham), Research Fellow at Leeds College of Art, Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts and Peer Reviewer of the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Recently she was Visual Director and Communications of the highly-successful Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 8<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Para Games, South East Asia’s Paralympics.

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