



Hand-in-hand: Activating the body in motion to re-connect with ourselves and others amidst a world in motion and commotion

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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**

Re-mapping

The world and its people are in motion and commotion. The 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 meter, 10 km, or 100 km, or to walk, use a wheelchair or a 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. “Fête des Tuiles”, or “Festival of Tiles”, is an annual festival that marks the 1788 riot that sparked the French Revolution. Florent Cholat, organising committee member and PhD student at the Grenoble Alpes

University and the University of Milano-Bicocca, invited me. 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 crossed 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 another one, who becomes an extension of your body. This setup allows you to check yourself as well; people who run know that if you are 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 practice", 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)*.



Figure 1 – Florent Cholat (centre) running while tethered to Richard Wright (Taoufik Trouissi and Gilles Dubois are running ahead of them)



Figure 2 – Poster for *Hand-in-Hand*

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 said in the *Guide Running UK*, a website to connect visually impaired, blind and shortsighted runners, “the importance of trust cannot be understated” (Wheatcroft, 2016). It advises beginners to be “open to learning and accepting that your pre-conceptions may be challenged”. Running tethered is probably “intimidating for your running partner also – be

patient and work together”. Finally yet importantly, whether visually impaired, blind or guided, “PLEASE never forget YOU are the most important person in this team” (2016). In other words, everybody *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 (“*détourner*”) 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 customized red ribbons – I wanted to uproot the “handcuffs” forced upon the asylum seekers. *Hand-in-Hand* thus became a methodology and metaphor to “*détourner*” something aggressive and antagonistic, into something positive and creative.

Productive antagonisms

A term that the 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 a “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, and curated. Moreover, it was based on a very basic sense of trust, “a sense that even if there was not 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, to experiment, and 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 when these boundaries are run over, run out, 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 when antagonistic disciplinary knowledge rub up against each other that 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 – not easy to figure out, considering that there were 6 hours to complete. Yet, they participated in my trial, even if for only 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 together. Ending the session with a handshake, Michel mentioned that he might 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 that are themselves hybrid and very close 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 maps “the relationships between things that do not exist in a linear cause-to-effect sequence” (Miller, 2003, 60). Rather than the analytical, rational or abstract thinking, it emphasizes the metaphorical, experiential and organic spheres. The Chinese “yin-yang” symbol (circa 14th century B.C.E.) perfectly exemplifies associative thinking, as well as productive antagonisms. What seem to be oppositional is actually intertwined in a creative interdependency; without one, the other is left hanging, literally speaking. As represented in the smaller black circle within the white section, and vice versa, each side encapsulates its “opposite” within.

The Chinese Daoists (Taoists) extended this correlative worldview by mapping the human body with the world around us. Each part of the body has a corresponding part *vis-a-vis*, not only through nature and the cosmos, but also with 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 one — 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 us, “Walk, don’t run!” The fact 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 the “Fête des 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 a “silly season” became a “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).

Has Summer 2016 become the *silliest* of all summers? Adhering to the Daoist rule of flux and transformation, the working life, *shifted* as well. 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 “well-being 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.

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 *démonstration* – everyday, playful and banal as they are – could make a contribution to the pro-

duction 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.

Naive, 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, far beyond, visual art, the punk movement, the Soviet mosaic 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 run over, run out, 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 speaking – Hand-in-Hand.

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