

Why We Run Summary of August 2011 discussion

Some of our panel were active runners and some actively hated running and posited that our investigation might be more pointedly focussed on 'Why we don't run!' There was agreement that there was no point setting this up as a quasi-scientific experiment when the end results would likely be statistically irrelevant and potentially either bad science or evidentially uninteresting.

It's certainly a strange thing to run around a hill for weeks in a light suit: it is culturally unique, but physiologically it is not that challenging so the results of any measurements - pulse rate, oxygen saturation in muscles etc - is unlikely to produce much of statistical value.

It soon became apparent that there was a real divergence of opinion about the value and values of running, the following series of verbatim comments recorded while the participants consumed a regular if not abusive quantity of alcohol reveal some of the quality of the ensuing debate:

I'm interested in new mental templates - how the body and psychology change. In the understanding of the whole individual and how through the arts, we might understand why someone holds themselves back. As a therapist, I saw changes, transformations in people through them pushing themselves. I'm therefore interested in how, through endurance activity someone can push through psychological boundaries by pushing themselves physically.

Running is pathological - you wouldn't be happy if you didn't do it. There is an addiction to running - it helps you to be 'happy'. This is not true for most people. Are we trying to get people into the minds of runners?

Isn't that the paradox of the work that you're trying to express? On a wonderful chemical level, what happens to you when you run - the sense of achievement, oneness with the world, the extraordinary experience - alongside the ordinariness of running, the boredom of doing it? It contains the macro and micro and the work explores the beauty of this paradox.

The beautiful exteriority of *Speed of Light* seen from afar versus the sweaty reality of the runner - gives the work a tension. It would be unspectacular looking at the individual - watching one runner is not interesting. The question is how do you get into the interior of the experience of collective running? That is often what art is doing - exploring the interiority of an experience.

Take the example of composer Jonathan Harvey. His music is about struggle, hardship etc. and arriving at bliss. If you take audience to bliss directly, you're stealing from them – they do not get to experience the struggle which is the whole point of the work.

What about running with something in mind – teasing something out, solving a problem during a run? Within the work could you have certain runners investigating certain topics, thinking those topics through, during the run? During their training they keep something in mind - running as a great enabler of thought, clarity and a way of solving dilemmas.

What if each night we did a live feed from a chosen runner, heartbeat, ECG, feedback of their thoughts and pain? By the end we have twenty different experiences of being in the work. There's a whole bunch of things you could do – use ultrasound to see how their heart increases and decreases in size.

It's not scientifically interesting to know twenty different people's muscle work etc, but it is interesting as a story.

Running is proved to make you more intelligent – exercising creates new stem cells.

Is that why half an hour of running helps you to answer questions you otherwise struggle to answer? What is it in the act of running which makes you perceive the mental space to confront something, answer something? Absorbedness in the action allows part of brain to solve a problem.

The frontal lobes having space to go into something more profound but to try and prove that through science is not going to be possible in *Speed of Light*.

An easy scientific question to solve: When you run, how does your brain function? But this isn't a profound question and doesn't answer what you're trying to get at.

So we're back to Bach – trying to answer a philosophical question using science won't work. You can gather data, but in the same way as trying to grasp Bach's Partita by describing it, you won't get close to the phenomenon of experiencing it.

For every person you ask, 'Why do you run?' there will be those who do it because they've entered a half marathon and others who had an inarticulate yearning to run. They wanted to create a shift or a change and they found running to be the thing that did it.



The great psychological minds would consider that to be the unconscious, the 'shadow'. The unconscious comes to the surface through physical activity, filling a gap between the conscious and unconscious.

I know there's nothing novel in the physiology we're going to be doing here but I think you might find there's nothing novel in the narratives or psychological testing you're going to do either. You might find that the only novel thing is the art!

The Panel

Angus Farquhar, Creative Director NVA and dedicated runner

Jane Connarty, Associate Director, *Speed of Light*

Dr Simon Gage OBE, Director, Edinburgh International Science Festival

Prof Chris Cooper, University of Essex

Sally Hobson, Head of Programme Development at Edinburgh International Festival

Dr Peter Dorward, General Practitioner and dedicated runner

Dr Hayden Lorimer, University of Glasgow and dedicated runner