

*Ideally, I'd like to be a bird,
but running
is a close second¹*

Thoughts on Care and Community in (Trail)Running

Christoph Szalay

Looking back on his athletic career and comparing it to the art world's double standards, lyricist and author Christoph Szalay unravels the parallels of both the performance-oriented art world and the professional sports system. Meanwhile, he's become more independent of deadlines, publishing houses, and art institutions through self-care and trail running.

I am a runner. I've always been. Ever since I can remember I've been running. I've been running on skis in winter, on roads and trails in spring, summer until late autumn. As a kid every movement is playful until it gets competitive, until it becomes performance. This is when I lost it. After years, a youth and early adulthood of being a professional athlete, I quit. I wanted to get as far away from it as possible. I wanted to remove every bit that could have connected me with the identity of an athlete. I wanted to be, to become, someone else. Instead of discussing the grind for my cross-country skis or the heart rate variability of the different skiing and running sessions, I threw myself into traveling, reading, and writing. My life slowly but surely became the life of an artist – living in Berlin at one point; going to openings, exhibitions, readings, performances, publishing my own articles, poems, books, applying for residencies, grants, awards, prizes, talking to and meeting different people within this global hub of artists from different disciplines and backgrounds sharing the same idea and ideal of creating visions in whichever form. I liked all that, I loved the warmth, the openness, the sharing, the caring for each other, the kind of communication, of community, of dialogue. I soaked up every moment until my athlete past was merely a glimpse. All this held up for more than a decade of being comfortable with the places and people I found and met. A decade of transformation, of constant flux, of vibrance, of stimulation and sensation. But after a decade, I fell out again.

The withdrawal was not sudden but slow and gradual. The reasons for it were as much personal as they were systemic. I grew tired. I grew tired of making connections, of producing work. I grew tired of trying to meet deadlines and expectations – my own as well as those of curators, publishers, directors. I grew tired of the uncertainty, of searching for the next call to the next residency, the next project, the next funding opportunity. So much reminded me of the surroundings I thought I'd left behind with

sports, especially the permanent pressure, the pressure to perform, as Jan Verwoert puts it.

We need to perform because that is what's asked of us. When we choose to make our living on the basis of doing what we want, we are required to get our act together and get things done in any place, at any time.²

Above all, I grew tired of art's double standards – articulating and positioning itself at the forefront of social discourse while repeating and perpetuating many of the things that it so passionately contrasts and criticizes in exhibitions, publications, lectures, meetings, performances, concerts, etc. From the most obvious things like the absurdity of advocating the fight against climate change while being heavily dependent on and operating within one of its main causes in international travel, to the more hidden realms like institutional hierarchies and the power plays within them that stand in stark contrast to the so often emphasized ideas, concepts, and practices of care and community. Of course, we must differentiate between institutionalized agencies and independent spaces, off-spaces, private initiatives, and so forth and of course a comment like this is heavily biased as well as an overgeneralization and honestly and luckily my own experiences in the field differ from the aforementioned, most of them actually, but nevertheless Martha Rosler's observations and remarks in her essay »Why Are People Being So Nice?« remain intact when she claims »Ambition, access, bankable information, flattery, gossip, infighting, competitiveness, in both manners and physical display«³ as constitutive elements of and within the art world. The same holds true for Jean-Claude Freymond-Guth who wrote of *alienation* in a very personal letter explaining the closing of his Basel-based gallery Freymond-Guth in 2017 as a consequence:

Alienation in all relationships between all participants. Alienation in a climate where space and time for reflection, discussion, and personal identification with form and content of contemporary art have become incompatible with the ever growing demand in constant, global participation, production and competition. (...) Today, I feel we need to urgently address questions to ourselves and our environments: What are the circumstances and ideals we – artists, gallerists, collectors, curators and writers – want to work in today? What are our reciprocal responsibilities and options?⁴

I like the harsh honesty in there and maybe it simply is about honesty, about admitting that one is part of the problem first, not the solution, just like writer, poet, curator, and dear friend Max Czollek wrote in an unpublished dialogue we started about the term and concept *Heimat* (home, homeland):

I plead guilty. Honestly. If guilt is another word for the responsibility of the perpetrator. Because – and it's almost trivial but still not part of the self-image of most people – I keep the periphery alive every day, because I consume their cheap products. I contribute to the melting of the polar ice because I go on faraway reading tours with limited benefits.

Maybe this is how reconsidering terms and concepts like *care* and *community* that everyone is so eager to proclaim and demand in the arts could start – with an honest confession. Maybe this could lead to a different practice, both on a personal as well as



an institutional level, at least it could lead to a different way of communicating, a more open and honest kind of communication about what we're actually doing here, under which circumstances, and where and how we would like to go from there.

...

I found running again through trail running, »a sport that takes place amid nature, and with respect for the environment, a sense of humility, shared community and a strong sense of sports ethics«⁵ as the official definition goes. Trail is running on »naturally variable terrain – mountains or forests, countryside or desert – including very often significant climbs and descents« as the definition continues or as founding members of HURT (Hawaiian Ultra Running Team) puristically emphasize: »This is how people were meant to run. That's the purest form of the sport.«⁶

Just as Alex Honnold, the first person to ever free solo climb the iconic El Capitan in Yosemite National Park, answers in an interview with Armita Golkar and Carin Klaesson at the Nobel Week Dialogue 2019 when asked: »What is it that you like, when climbing? I think my love of climbing stems more from the actual, the physical act, the sensation, the feeling of moving upward,«⁷ it's first and foremost the sensation of running that's intriguing – looking out of the window into the sky, the slopes, the rustling of fabric when you slip on your shirt, the lacing of your shoes, the first steps on the ground, the swallowing of the landscape, the sweat on your skin, the traction, the tweak of your muscles on the ascents, the feeling of flying on the transitions, the descents, the exhaustion and happiness after.

Running is first a physical act, an act of movement, as such it is an act of care, care for yourself – your body, your mind. »Running for me has always been a medicine for my mind,«⁸ says elite marathon runner Lydia O'Donnell. By nurturing it the medicine became a tool to improve her own mental health, an effect O'Donnell eventually elevated to a communal level by founding One Step, a movement (...), to raise awareness of anxiety and depression and spread the simple message of how important movement, in particular running, is for our own mental health,⁹ a movement that began »as a small group of people coming together to discuss feelings, emotions, and of course to exercise,«¹⁰ a movement that grew into »17 communities across the world coming together weekly to spread the message and connect people from all walks of life.«¹¹

There's something that goes beyond just the physical sensation of running, of trail running, aspects like *care* and *community* that are deeply entwined with the understanding of the sport. »The trail running scene has a good community where a lot of people hold the same values of wanting to be in the outdoors/nature,« replies Ruth Croft, one of the world's fastest trail runners, when I reached out to her and it doesn't really matter what magazine or book you read, whatever movie, interview, or documentary you watch about trail running, whomever you speak to from the field, you always come across the emphasis on these core values that seem to be shared amongst its participants.¹²

What Jan Verwoert interprets as »a cipher for a communality that is not organized toward an ulterior end, a task or function it has to perform on demand«¹³ in the study works of Silke Otto-Knapp on the translation of patterns of social life into modern ballet, is even more true for running with the difference of it not being a cipher but rather an actual practice, a practice that is, to follow Verwoert again, »unconditional and existential rather than economical.«¹⁴

Running as a practice is something that is simple in its form, it's something that's accessible,¹⁵ something that is truly universal. Running can be an act of empowerment,



just as the documentary *Limitless – A Documentary on Women & Running*¹⁶ shows, for example, a movie that follows seven Indian women from different castes and classes, some of them who have never even run before, on their journey toward and with running and how it shapes not only them personally but their whole community and even beyond. Or, as runner, writer and DJ Knox Robinson even claims, »Getting out and lacing up your shoes going out there for a run just to dig deeper into yourself, there's nothing more radical and revolutionary than that.«¹⁷ Whether revolutionary or not, one thing that it is for certain is a practice that defines itself through a close relation to nature, even to the point of questioning its own contradictory role in the face of global climate crisis.

Where we run. (...) It's not only about the fact that s*he runs, but where. And there lies the problem. (...) S*he easily takes the car to drive 150 km to run a trail, into the Alps or a low mountain range, wherever desire takes her*him, where s*he thinks to best celebrate her*his sport, where the best pics for the Insta-post happen in the evening. (...) Whoever drives the car into the forest to go for a run – that's like being a Greenpeace member and voting for the AfD. It doesn't match. (...) I don't have a solution for you. Sorry. I cheat myself through my conscience, over trails and past environmentalism. (...) I try to change for the better.¹⁸

And what Denis Wischniewski, trail runner and editor of *Trail*, Germany's biggest and best-known magazine for trail running, doesn't even mention in his column, is how material intensive running, trail running can be, especially in terms of shoes – a broad rule is to use as many pair of shoes a year as you run in a week in order to reduce the possibility of injury. As is often the case, the reality of running is more complicated than advertised, but being open and honest about contradictions and complicity is a start, a start for a different practice altogether, one that a lot of big brands in the industry started to make years ago and continue to make.

Despite these contradictions I am still convinced that a practice that is based on moving in the outdoors is able to create a different relation to oneself, to other people, to the environment, and yes, maybe even to other species – to the deer, ferns, larches and lichens – maybe I really believe that running, that trail running might be a possibility of creating a multispecies conscience, a conscience of »becoming-with¹⁹, (...) things and living beings (...) inside and outside human and nonhuman bodies«²⁰ as Donna Haraway examines and establishes, a conscience that is ensued by a practice of »passion and action, detachment and attachment, (...) cultivating response-ability; that is also collective knowing and doing, an ecology of practices.«²¹ What if I really believe that.

What if I really believe what Bernd Heinrich, retired biologist and professor of biology at the University of Vermont as well as lifelong (ultra)runner, says, »Of course, ideally, I'd like to be a bird, but running is a close second.«²²

I would really like to believe that.

Christoph Szalay, author and lyricist, studied German language and literature in Graz, and Art in Context at the University of the Arts, Berlin. Szalay mainly writes poetry and hybrid prose, and works as coordinator for literature for the FORUM Stadtpark Graz. He was a fellow at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in the discipline of Visual Arts.

1 Why We Run w/ Bernd Heinrich. Salomon TV. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2e4nFm-Ffk>.

2 Jan Verwoert, »Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform,« in: Julieta Aranda, Stephen Squibb, Anton Vidokle, Brian Kuan Wood (eds.), *What's Love (or Care, Intimacy, Warmth, Affection) Got to Do with It?* Berlin: Sternberg Press 2018: p. 206. In case you were wondering about the ominous we, Verwoert continues, »Who is we? (...) It is we, the creative types – who invent jobs for ourselves by exploring and exploiting our talents to perform small artistic and intellectual miracles on a daily basis. It is we, the socially engaged – who create communal spaces for others and ourselves by performing as instigators or facilitators of social exchange. When we perform, we generate communication and thereby build forms of communality.«

3 Martha Rosler, »Why Are People Being So Nice?« in: Julieta Aranda, Stephen Squibb, Anton Vidokle, Brian Kuan Wood (eds.), *What's Love (or Care, Intimacy, Warmth, Affection) Got to Do with It?*, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2018: p. 37.

4 Available online at: <https://news.artnet.com/market/read-closing-letter-freymond-guth-1067177>.

5 Definition by the ITRA – the International Trail Running

Association, founded 2013 in Courmayeur, France. <https://itra.run/content/definition-trail>.

6 ROOTED – The story of HURT. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkVq1JeUAy4&t=258s>.

7 Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nq9ZAGqvmfY&t=1s>.

8 Lydia O'Donnell, Miles Are Mental. Available online at TEMPO Journal. <https://tempojournal.com/article/miles-are-mental/>.

9 Idem.

10 Idem.

11 Idem.

12 To be clear, when I state the possibilities and potential of running as a practice of care and community, I am speaking of and from a noncompetitive standpoint. Even though I consider especially trail running a sport that really tries to live up to the self-imposed and articulated values, there would be a whole other discussion to be held about all the contradictions and dependencies of competitive and professional sports – risks, injuries, economic pressure, media pressure, and yes, the elephant in the room – doping.

13 Jan Verwoert, »Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to

Defy the Pressure to Perform,« in: Julieta Aranda, Stephen Squibb, Anton Vidokle, Brian Kuan Wood (eds.), *What's Love (or Care, Intimacy, Warmth, Affection) Got to Do with It?* Berlin: Sternberg Press 2018: p. 227.

14 Idem: p. 232.

15 Of course all of this is based on the assumption that one's body is able to move. There's no denying the fact that severe health issues can make it difficult, even impossible, to move, let alone run. Furthermore – running starts with walking, with putting one foot in front of the other. Before you start running, you walk.

16 Limitless – A Documentary on Women & Running. Directed by Vrinda Samarth. Believe Films 2017.

17 Run Wild: Ep. 5 Grit. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNmdgNp1_c8.

18 Denis Wischniewski, »Denis' Kolumne,« in: Trail 01/20. Translation by the author.

19 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*. London: Durham 2016: p. 12.

20 Idem: p. 16.

21 Idem: p. 34.

22 See note 1.