

Makers Who Move: Solitary Exercise and the Creative Mind

Jessica Hemmings

Abstract

In this essay, the spoken accounts of nine craft practitioners who engage in solitary running and cycling reveal how repetitive exercise relates to decisions made in their studios. Whereas collaboration remains the dominant approach of most research agendas, the reflections here focus on the varied ways solitary exercise offers a productive trigger for some practitioners' creative thinking. The investigation seeks to enhance awareness of alternative approaches to cultivating creative thinking that may disrupt our fixed intellectual routines within and beyond craft practices.

To the uninitiated, running and cycling—particularly when undertaken alone—can seem like monotonous activities. Perspectives from within embodied experiences, however, are a far different matter. This essay is an attempt to restore credence to some of the embodied knowledge that has incrementally become separated from my, and I suspect others', professional lives.^[1] I do not arrive at this topic from a particularly objective standpoint; my curiosity stems from my own childhood lived in motion. More recently, I have channelled my need for movement into fifteen years of annual marathon running. Through these experiences, I have belatedly come to recognise that during the solitary hours my body is in motion I arrive at ideas that are inaccessible when stationary in front of a computer screen.

“Exercise can be a habit that undoes habit: a way to regularly shake up our intellectual routines,” observes philosopher Damon Young.^[2] Young's observation seems to comprise a contradiction: an acknowledgement that it is the experience of physical exercise routines that, at least for some, unlock otherwise routine thinking. This seeming contradiction is at the core of this enquiry. Through conversations with craft practitioners, I have sought to understand how the repetitive movements and schedules of running or cycling—with detours to walking and yoga—impact decisions some craft practitioners' make in their studios.^[3]

While I did not become the weaver my undergraduate education taught me to be, I strive to keep my writing practice as close as possible to the crafts I write about. Annie Dillard sums up the gap I continuously attempt to shrink when she describes writing as a visceral experience:

When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick, a wood-carver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year.^[4]

Rebecca Solnit similarly evokes writing as a physical experience when she writes: “Language is like a road; it cannot be perceived all at once because it unfolds in time, whether heard or read.”^[5] Dillard and Solnit capture much of my experience of how words find their way onto the page. The welcome—but unexpected—arrival of a new idea occurs infrequently when I am stationary.

My own experience of the thinking that accompanies my long-distance running now follows a predictable narrative. This pattern appears with far more consistency than the physical experience itself, which can differ dramatically from one run to the next. Within minutes of starting a long solo run, one of the following thoughts usually crosses my mind: *I have chosen the wrong day to do this; I am starting too late; I am not wearing the right underwear.* Followed by: *why have I still not bought the right underwear?* All these internal thoughts and questions provide potential reasons for why this is the run I will not be able to finish.

About an hour after these initial doubts tumble out, very different ideas begin to emerge: *this is the best possible thing I could have chosen to do with my time. The weather is amazing* (even if it is raining). *The landscape is remarkable* (even if it is not). *What an astonishing way to spend time.* Crucially: *how clever am I to have decided to do this today.* The following hour often arrives with quite the opposite outlook: *this is a stupid way to spend the very little free time I have.* More to the point: *I am stupid for thinking I could cover this distance.* Years of experience have taught me that these thoughts are a fair indication that fatigue is taking hold, something I now recognise this for the familiar little devil that it is.

Within the next hour another idea pops up that always feels exceptionally novel in the moment it arrives: *I could stop.* That would solve everything: *stop and this will all feel better.* I don’t know why the idea of stopping always manages to announce itself as the most unique idea that has ever occurred to me. Perhaps this is because it is always quickly countered with: *you are not stopping just because this has become difficult. You don’t have any evidence that you are injured, so don’t stop.* On a practical level: *you (again) forgot to bring money, so you are either walking home or running home.* For the remainder of the distance, the mantra *do not stop* plays a prominent role.

Mixed in among this now predictable narrative are thoughts that seemingly arrive from nowhere, entirely disconnected from what I am doing: *chapter three really should be the introduction; the title can be this; you forgot the main point was to include that in the writing.* It is access to these unbidden insights that keep me running.

The individuals I interviewed for this research are makers who move; craft practitioners who discuss the place solitary exercise plays in the production of their studio work. I have unashamedly sought dialogue with like-minded individuals, starting with what I thought would be a very short list of craftspeople I, by chance, knew were also runners or cyclists. My short list soon became a long list though, as each conversation led to suggestions of further individuals, a little less than half of who appear in the excerpts included here. Each conversation contains its own particularities, but together they reveal what I see as an underrated component of some craft practitioners’ lives. Together these voices also offer a caution against seeking too stark a separation between the personal and professional.^[6]

Embodied cognition (cognition shaped by the body) and creative thinking (the production of appropriate novelty) are far from underexplored research topics. Research from cognitive science has confirmed that aerobic exercise impacts brain function more than other types of exercise.^[7] Some sports research now also

considers the body in ways that go beyond what Gareth McNarry, Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson and Adam Evans observe in their writing about competitive swimming as “a research lacuna with regard to in-depth analyses of actually ‘doing’ sporting activities within specific physical cultures”.^[8] For example, Allen-Collinson, writing with John Hockey, has considered the role of heat and pressure in running and scuba diving.^[9] Sarah Nettleton writes about the ways fell runners^[10] in England’s Lake District experience the landscape that “generates a somatic aesthetic.”^[11] More recently, Allen-Collinson writing with Patricia C. Jackman has focused on the “elemental haptics” of women’s fell running.^[12] While Richard Cook and Hockey explore what is done by the body (and the bike) in their specific attention to rider-bike-ground interactions of gravel cycling, likening the “ephemeral, transitory, and sensory sporting process” to a craft practice.^[13]

The prior examples predominantly focus on the decision-making that informs the activity itself, rather than on how the body in motion impacts decisions entirely elsewhere, as I dwell on here—in the craft studio specifically. In keeping with many of the contributors to this journal issue, my position is rooted in the literary, rather than the social sciences. This too is not without precedent.^[14] The runner and writer Lindsey A. Freeman, who comes closest to my curiosity when referring to the “things that I could see only when I was moving”.^[15] I take Freeman’s seeing as not functioning exclusively in the optical sense, or the societal as she suggests. Rather, my interest is in the ideas that emerge in motion and lay dormant in the sedentary body.

Claire Barber^[16]

A fundamental component of Claire Barber’s creative practice is the investigation of cultural traditions and vocabularies related to textiles. Her perception of the textile weave directs how ideas are put together and leads to an engagement with materials on an intimate scale, as well as larger site-intervention projects.



Figure 1 Claire Barber, *You Are the Journey (An Embroidered Intervention)*, 2015, used ferry tickets, reclaimed yarn, pins and needle weaving over used ferry tickets, 220 x 119 cm, courtesy of the artist. Photographer Jamie Collier.

Claire:

I forced it once: I cycled across Iceland and back and used it as a vehicle for making a textile. But it was quite contrived. Because I have cycled a lot, I thought there should be a way to do something with this cycling. I am an opportunist; I have to make work whatever the situation. I made this piece called *Cycle Lace* and I worked with children. I got them to wrap their bicycles with silk and cycle alongside the river Severn, and then collect materials along the cycle path and dye the textiles. In 2009 I was in Iceland on my own. Three times a day I diligently bandaged my bike with sleeping bag liners I had ripped up. You have a studio wherever you are; it is about being resourceful.

That was an unsubtle version. But there is something more subtle with running for me that you will not see in any artistic outcome. Generally, it feels good to go out. Whatever you are doing, creative or not, it is still good to go out and run. Running can help me feel more agile in whatever activity—answering an email or being at my computer doing university work.

It would not feel like a proper run if I went with other people, because it is about me feeling connected with myself. We have so many barriers in life: self-consciousness, different protocols and roles. At its best, running means you are not really trying but you connect. You do not have to make an effort. It is quite precious, and I would not really want to share it. I would not even want to put my finger on it too much. If you become too self-aware you aren't going to form those connections.

I have made embroidery to sound. I tried going to where I run and was surprised to realise how much I miss when I run. There is something to be gained from running, but there is also something to staying still, which has a whole different palette. It is not about an observational art practice, in which you might get inspiration from colours, forms or shapes. It is not about that, because I realised that it is probably something more internal.

Cycling was quite heroic and adventurous and about me being isolated—a lifestyle. It was an opportunity when I was younger and did not have any ties. Cycling came back into my life when I taught my son to cycle at the old age of twelve! While cycling can be thrilling, there is something else about running. I love the idea that you just have your running shoes. That is all it takes. A bike is a tool. It is something that can thrill you, but for me it is not the same as running, and the thinking is not the same either. My creativity with cycling was more preconceived and technical. I had an idea that I pursued, whereas with running it is about this connection.

To be creative is very rare. It does not happen often. But there is something that is allowed to happen when you run that cannot happen anywhere else for me. I have what I call my luxury run. For many years I didn't believe in driving to a run. Recently I have driven. If the carpark is empty, I am so grateful. It is not that I don't like people. But I love to be solitary when I am doing computer work, art or anything. I can't bear sharing an office. I have always worked really early, and when colleagues come in there is a protocol of social time, when no actual work takes place!

Those thoughts that you have tried so hard to generate—suddenly you understand something. But you are not working to sort it out. Running is a different clearing of the mind, it feels really positive. I like to run early in the morning, but that is not often an option. Weather does not matter. Rain is better for me, because I am less likely to see anyone.

I was brought up in Kingston, near Lewes. When I go back, I always do the same run that I have done since I was a teenager: repetition, for decades. I am the same here in Holmfirth. I have this run that I call the up and over. I think it is nice when you don't have to think about where you are going. Every day is different, but I find I just

love to do the same route. I am not looking for a different type of route. I love to see the same things and the same shapes—I don't have to figure anything out.

Making work now has to be shoehorned into my life in a less poetic way. Running too, to a degree. It is lovely when you get a level of immersion in a work that is similar to going for a run. Textiles can be quite small, but they can also be so expansive. I don't know if running means that I am more patient. Patience is because you are so ambitious for the work that you will do whatever it needs.

There is a kind of stamina that you need for making work. It often feels as if nobody wants you to do it! Your parents don't want you to do it; the university doesn't want you to do it; your family doesn't want you to do it; finances don't want you to do it. It is like this illegal thing. You can do it and be congratulated by the university when you achieve something, and that is when it's done. So you need stamina or commitment. When you exercise, you are alert, you are sharp. You need to be fit to make work in the twenty-first century as a woman, otherwise it just won't ever happen.

Liz Collins^[17]

Liz Collins is a New York City-based, queer, feminist multimedia artist, who specialises in working with textiles and fibres. Over three decades, Collins's works and projects have manifested in a diverse yet interconnected range of art and design contexts. Working equally with slow hand-making processes and fast industrial weaving, Collins uses a vocabulary of geometric abstraction, vibrant colours and extreme material contrasts to respond to life on all levels.



Figure 2 Liz Collins, Woven Wall, 2015, Rayon jersey fabric and wood, Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery at Barnsdall Park (LAMAG). Image courtesy of the artist.

Liz:

I grew up with an active lifestyle. My mom was a single parent and took us hiking a lot. I grew up learning to move my body, and that was a way to find peace and calm. We had a fair amount of turmoil in our family life growing

up. I think going to the great outdoors and bike-riding were solutions. My father also lived outdoors. Both my parents had a puritan work ethic, which at times has been problematic for me, but it is just who I am. I learned that work was salvation, which isn't always true.

As an artist, my work captures some of that movement and energy. Being in my body and being on a bike. Walking and bike-riding are things I pull into my everyday life, going from point A to point B, but biking is also something I've long done. I'm very invested in efficiency, I've always been an efficient person. Biking has been my efficient way to exercise and experience invigoration, inspiration and euphoria, all while going somewhere.

I have been riding a bike in New York City for many, many years. Every time I live here, which has been during different eras of my adult life, my bike has been my primary way to get around. Not just in my neighbourhood, but from Brooklyn to Manhattan and all over the place. I feel like my bike is an integral part of who I am as a person. Maybe it's a stretch, but just as much as art is in a way. I can live without my bike, but I can't live without physical movement and creativity.

I know that if I don't move my body, I don't feel well. It is a baseline level of wellness. There is ongoing physicality in all areas of my life. Yes, I may spend a whole day in my studio. I may ride my bike there and back and sit at my computer all day in my studio, which I hate, but sometimes I have to do that. But at least it is book-ended by moving through space with my body.

In my studio I climb ladders a lot, which I love. I am the kind of person who will rearrange all the furniture in my apartment, even if it is too heavy for me, or climb on a high windowsill to put a nail in the ceiling because I don't have a ladder. There are all kinds of precarious situations that happen when you're alone. I was born in the year of the monkey. Who knows? *Knitting Nation* was about the intense physical labour that textile-making can require. Now my labour is more hidden: deconstructing fabric is intense physical labour. It is very hard, but I love the physicality and endurance it takes.

My macro-weavings—the potholder rugs and woven walls—demand a consuming, physically demanding process. They are about scaling up the meticulous, intricate process of weaving. Making all the elements bigger just means it is that much more consuming—yards and yards of yarn, with the whole weight of jersey fabric. I would weave those pieces with friends and then go home and be broken, but I like that. The demand and the reward. In *Knitting Nation* we would also get really exhausted. One *Knitting Nation* was the same five people doing the same thing for six hours without breaks.

When I run, I see it as an act of meditation. I learned from the app Headspace to count while running. That is what I do now. I don't listen to music; trying to find a great song irritates me. Instead, I just count to a hundred, over and over again, in sync with my footsteps. I run around Prospect Park, and I don't know how many hundreds I've counted, but I just stay on that number sequence. With bike-riding there is a necessary level of focus, when being on a bicycle and engaging with cars, especially in busy cities. The level of vigilance needed while moving is itself a kind of meditation.^[18]

I feel that running is a solitary activity. Part of the magic is to be alone with your pain. That is not to say I haven't run with other people, but I don't seek it out. I am a parent and have human exchanges, but I relish the solitude that comes with a run. I'm not interested in riding a bike with another person either. I will if I have to, but I know I am a very proficient bike rider. Part of riding for me is the freedom of autonomy. If I ride with someone else, I have to constantly think of them. I don't like that as much. I live an idiosyncratic life. That is part of who I am too.

I sometimes yearn for that kind of regularity, like people I know who do the morning run every fucking day. I'm jealous of that, but no matter what I do, I can't do it. It brings out my internal anti-authoritarian. If I dictate to myself, I will rebel against it really quickly.

But there is nothing like the experience of moving on a bicycle. I have spent more times on a bike feeling, *If I died today, if this is it, if this is all I'm going to get, this is all I need*. I can remember a lot of those moments; the visceral power of just being alive and the very simple means of moving fast through space and seeing stuff. The amount you can take in on a bicycle when there is nothing between you and everything else, no barrier, no seatbelt, is incredibly freeing. I am invested in freedom. It is intertwined with my personality, my existence as an artist, and the choices I make about living my life the way I do.

Michael Eden^[19]

Michael Eden is a maker whose work sits at the intersection of craft, design and art. His work explores contemporary themes through the redesign of historical, culturally familiar objects by utilising digital manufacturing and materials.

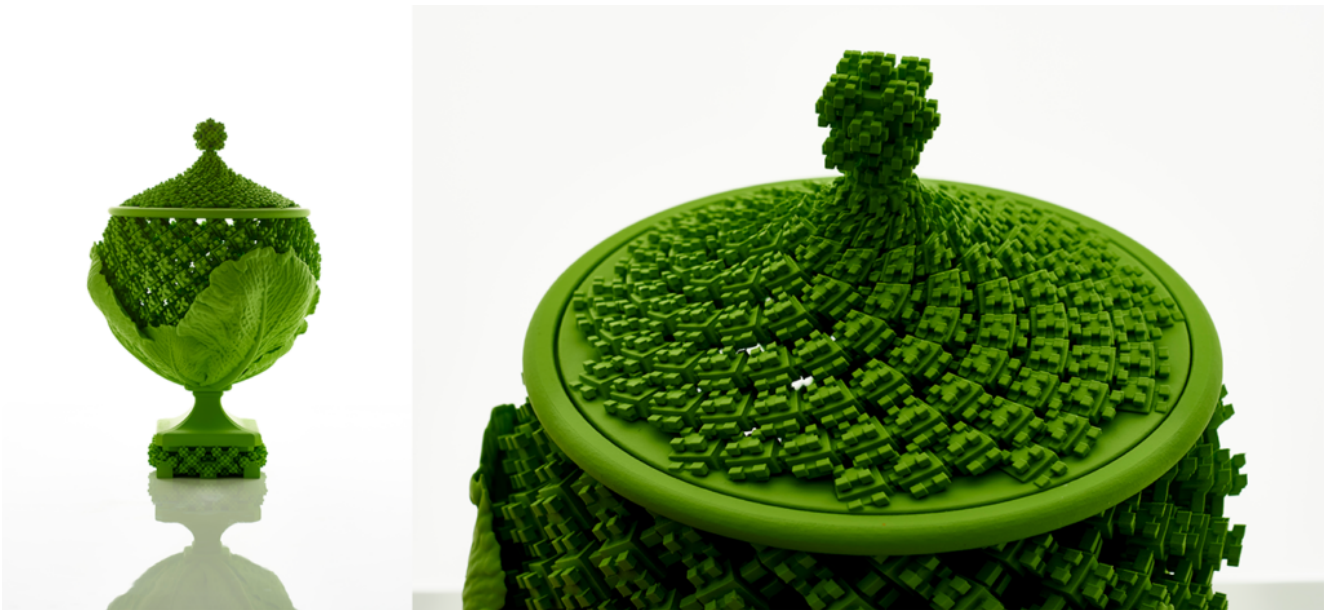


Figure 3 Michael Eden, Romanesco Vase (detail) © Michael Eden, 2017, additive manufacturing from a high quality nylon material with a green soft mineral coating, courtesy of Adrian Sassoon, London. Photo by Sylvain Deleu.

Michael:

Many, many years ago, I bought a really nice pair of Walsh running shoes. They were gorgeous things and I tried running in the hills around Kendal, where we lived at the time. But I just could not get into it. I was and still am a keen cyclist. I just did not get to the stage at which I enjoyed running. It was not doing anything for me. So I thought, *oh, blow it*. I'll just stick to the bike. I've been cycling on a lightweight bike since I was about 19. So around 45 years.

Having spent 25 years throwing pots, my practice now uses computer-aided design software. It is extremely sedentary, and at times all-consuming. My head is in a different place when I am sat in front of the screen,

deeply involved in trying to develop a piece of work, creating iterations, moving forward and problem solving. I have to step back from it sometimes and go out and do something physical. It is not just about doing something physical; it is also to put that part of brain activity used in my design work back a level in my consciousness. Going out on the bike has always been a combination of enjoyment of the environment, being fortunate to live in a very beautiful place, and the rhythm of cycling. There is also the function of cycling; of being able to move from A to B at a pace that gets you somewhere while seeing the details of the journey, but not rushing through it.

My earlier ceramic work produced mostly functional pieces, and some large individual decorative pieces too. The work was about material and process and function. We were engaged in the craft of making decorated earthenware. Cycling was just a pleasant pastime and a means to keep myself fit. Now, my work is very much ideas-based. There is a narrative to the work that needs to be explored over a period of weeks before I even go to the computer. I use a sketchbook, write notes, read books, and use the computer for research purposes.

Jumping on the bike now will help me focus and bring these worlds together to make something meaningful from them. I will doodle in the sketchbook and then move to the computer and start drawing. It is very much the idea that leads the way now. The computer is a tool that must serve me to translate an idea into a tangible object. I do not want the technology to lead the way. Though it opens all sorts of creative possibilities, I do not want to be seduced by the complex software that I use.

Only over the last two or three years have I come to realise that cycling is also a part of my creative thinking. I realised that on numerous occasions a way forward to solve a problem, a technical issue, would suddenly just pop out of the ether while cycling. Part of my brain is obviously still working while cycling, the cogs are still turning over this problem, but I am not conscious of it. While I watch a buzzard circle above me, either technical issues pop up, or creative ideas flow and develop. It often comes as this light-bulb moment from nowhere.

My expensive cycling hobby should be tax-deductible! Bicycles do not come cheap, but they help my creative process. I come back enthused. I am invigorated. When it comes to four o'clock in the afternoon and I am getting tired, I need to put on some loud music, dance, or go out on my bike. I have my regular routes, including a short 22-mile hilly one, which takes an hour and a quarter. It is a beautiful route, and I can see whether the tide is coming in or out and look out for wildlife, but I am also cogitating in the background. It is all happening at the same time.

Onkar Kular^[20]

Onkar Kular is Professor of Design at HDK-Valand, Academy of Art & Design, University of Gothenburg. His research is disseminated through commissions, exhibitions, publications and teaching. He works mainly from his fifth-floor office and aims for an average count of 10,000 steps a day.



Figure 4 Onkar Kular, Stanley Picker Creators Academy (SPCA), 2016, mixed media installation, courtesy of the artist and Ellie Laycock.

Onkar:

I remember my first run after the birth of my daughter. I walked and did a mild jog right at the end in Brockwell Park, which became my centre for running. I found running develops a kind of nuanced capability to control a mental state. I have used it as a way to think. But I have heard the opposite reasoning too: running or doing exercise as a time to completely distance oneself. I ran for completely the opposite: I literally used it as a concentrated way to think in the repetition that comes through distance running.

Six or seven circuits around Brockwell Park is about a half a marathon, including the trip back and forth to my house. After the second or third round, which would be killer, I would enter a mental state where I would not really concentrate on the act of running. I don't want to think about which red light I am going to hit. I want a prescribed route. There is a creative act in putting a running route together essentially on a level of safety. The irony is that I then do not have to think about it.

On longer runs I would not listen to music because I started to enjoy listening to my breathing. When I became more serious, I connected to two apps. One was called Map My Run. I enjoyed the kind of competition between the voice and trying to hit certain markers. I also came across something called Zombies Run, which was like running through fiction. But then the novelty wore off.

I stopped running, partly because it became quite obsessive. I recognised that it brought out certain characteristics on a personal level. By that time, I had a second child and running started to impact my domestic life and work. I was working at the RCA, and I would cycle there most days.^[21] Then I started to also plan runs going home from the RCA. I enjoyed running a lot, but it became too central, I became really inflexible, and at the same time I got a little bit ill.

I've been doing Ashtanga yoga for two years now, three or four times a week every other day. There is a standing Ashtanga routine that takes about an hour that I do, say, on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and on the in-between days I do breathing practices. I spend half an hour first thing in the morning just activating my breathing. Yoga is entirely a way to not think about work. Maybe there is a durational aspect to yoga practice? I

sense it bleeds more into the day. Running seemed like a fixed block of time I would do something within. You have the good feeling good factor afterwards, but you also have the anxiety of ensuring that you protect the time to run.

I use yoga for fitness, but it is predominately psychological. I try to ensure I reduce my brain activity as much as possible and find ways to think more clearly. Committing to a run or a swim creates fixed markers that delineate thinking times. In the summer, for example, I finish work usually at three and cycle to the lake and go swimming. I connect that to residue; it feels like I am washing away parts of the day that are not required anymore. For the last 15 years, my practice has been heavily relational. It is always about building relations in different ways and making connections either within the academic context or outside. As you build networks of relations, you also need to start to navigate them, and even escape that sometimes.

Sue Lawty^[22]

Sue Lawty is an artist and designer who constructs textiles from Raphia, Hemp and lead, and makes drawings and assemblages using tiny stones, which create a kind of pixelated cloth. The work is slow, thoughtful and meticulous. Defined as much by absence as presence, it quietly draws the viewer in to notice almost imperceptible differences.

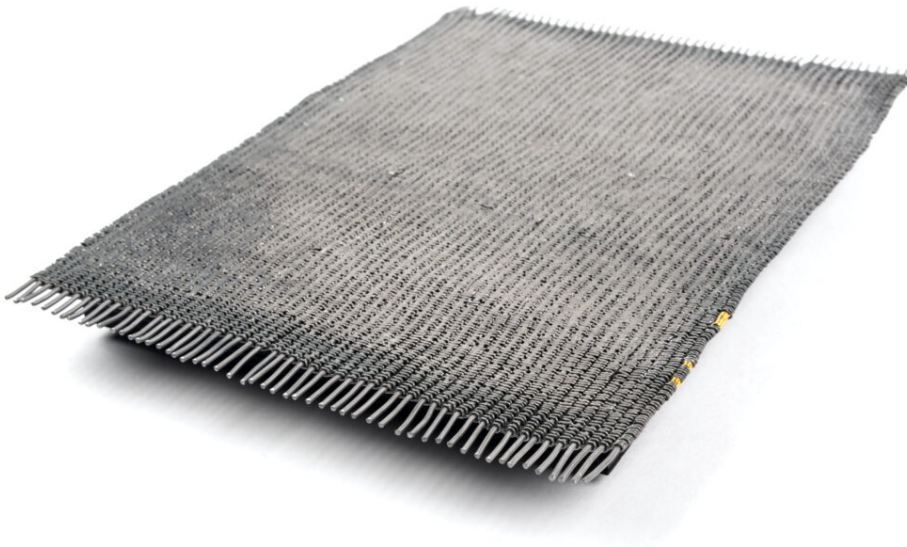


Figure 5A Sue Lawty, Lead XVI, 2020, lead, 24ct gold, 29 x 20 cm, courtesy the artist and private collector.



Figure 5B Sue Lawty, Lead XVI (detail), 2020, lead, 24ct gold, courtesy the artist and private collector.

Sue:

I lead international mountain treks and I am a fell runner. My work is rooted in an emotional, spiritual and physical engagement with the land. Fell running requires complete engagement; being fully immersed in it as opposed to looking at it. There is an elemental connection to wind, water, frost, mist, sun, a warm breeze on your skin—you see it, touch it, hear it, smell it and you even taste the cool rain or salt sweat. There is an unrelenting and direct contact with the ground, treading every inch of the route: hard uneven gritstone, soft wet moorland peat, the forgiving feel underfoot of forest floor.

I have rarely experienced running as a disappointment. It can be hard to make the effort to get out sometimes, particularly in challenging, cold weather. But moving solo, under your own power, through a rugged landscape is exciting and not without a frisson of fear. The euphoria of being alone, alive and alert in the wild is not unlike the euphoria of being alone in the middle of a piece of work that's going well. Embarking on a major project is akin to starting a long walking or running adventure—you have to commit, to be prepared to dig deep and push through the tough bits, to see it through. Focus, purpose, resilience, self-reliance—you're on your own whether you succeed or not.

With fell running you must be in the moment, totally there, on it, watching every foot fall while planning ahead to the next and the one after. But as one part of your brain is dealing with all the live feeds and your muscles are responding to the minute nuances of stride and balance, the subconscious brain heads off on its own, free to roam and go where it pleases. During a solo run, the rhythm of body and breathing somehow allows a coherence of clear lucid thoughts to tumble in, similar to those in the fleeting, marginal moments of waking up. Often creative challenges tussled with for days find solutions then.

Strenuous physical pursuits are also about developing an understanding of personal physical limits. Over the years I have learnt how it feels to be completely spent, to be functioning on less than empty but to still keep going—to find reserves I didn't know were there. With that knowledge comes a trust that when you do need to dig deeper there will be something to draw upon. After a 22-mile fell race, I'm totally shattered, a bit broken. I'm vulnerable and raw. I like the stripped back nature of that. It can feed creativity. A huge amount of energy is

needed to do the work, but I need to be precise and controlled and measured. I think to be muscularly exhausted after a run can be really helpful in that. And the confidence is transferable.

Drummond Masterton^[23]

Drummond Masterton's making practice draws inspiration from extreme landscapes, geometry and pattern-making. He utilises industrial Computer Numerically Controlled (CNC) milling machines as craft tools to create one-off artefacts, manipulating cutting commands and automated software to create controlled, intricate surface textures and patterns. These take hundreds of hours to produce, subverting the intended purpose of the machine, which is to speed up product manufacture.



Figure 6A Drummond Hastings Masterton, KOM, 2012, aluminium, asymmetric four axis CNC milling, 247 x 138 mm, courtesy of the artist. Work part of Shipley Art Gallery collection, Gateshead, UK.



Figure 6B Drummond Hastings Masterton, KOM, 2012, aluminium, asymmetric four axis CNC milling, 247 x 138 mm, courtesy of the artist. Work part of Shipley Art Gallery collection, Gateshead, UK.

Drummond:

I got my first bicycle in primary school. I really hated that we had to take a cycling proficiency test as I already knew how to cycle, and I refused to do the test. So, I fell out of love with the bicycle when I was seven or eight and then came back to it after a road accident. As an almost-teenager I decided that I was going to choose the most dangerous sport possible and took up mountain biking. That is really where the freedom and escapism of getting out of the house and going places started to develop.

Me and my friends would cycle 40–50 miles at the weekends on our mountain bikes and that meant you could go places that parents would not want to take you in the car, and you just had a sense of freedom. Growing up in Scotland near Ben Lomond it was easy to get into high mountainous areas—wild, quite remote. It felt special to experience the landscape, just you and your effort and your energy.

My love of making and bicycles went hand in hand. We used to modify and hack bits of bicycles to make them lighter or shinier. Customising, which might be polishing or drilling holes in them or whatever dangerous things we could do in a friend's garage. That set me off down the route of industrial product design when I was 14 or 15. I took my bicycle with me to art school in Aberdeen, where it gave me another form of escape. When I went to university, I was only 17, so I could not really engage in the forms of escapism that a lot of my friends did, which was going to pubs and clubs. I balanced this by going off into the Grampian Hills on my bicycle.

I think most interests begin as group-based activities and as you become more confident, they move into solo pursuits. I used to run marathons in Aberdeen and cycle 120 miles into the hills. It certainly became a form of thought processing. At that age, about 20, I don't think I could relate to that as a critical element to my work. It was just a sporting activity I did.

As I went into my Master's course I was more removed from those experiences. In London, far away from any sort of dramatic landscape, my work began to seek out ways to revisit those earlier experiences in a craft form. I made transformational vessels informed by my interest in the art of suffering found in solo pursuits such as ultra-distance cycling events. The meditative process one goes through in those long-distance pursuits is quite trance-like.

This enabled me to explore the work in both physical and mental forms. Physically, I would often go and visit the sites of great cycling accomplishments by previous cyclists and ride the same routes they had ridden to go through the similar suffering exercise and try to build more empathy with the landscape.^[24] In my later work as a Research Fellow at the university I found that the digital world is quite hectic, quite complex, often using extremely expensive equipment or time-consuming processes where you might be making something for 80–90 hours for several weeks. You would arrive at critical points where doing something, or not doing something, would dramatically change the outcome of what was in front of you.

Cycling gave me space to think away from the computer. Some of the most interesting pieces I made at that time resulted from coming back and looking at that piece through a new lens after I had cycled: a moment of clarity that may only be 60 or 40 minutes' worth. Coming back, you are really refreshed and think, *I know exactly what to do*, and often take a completely different decision from the route you had chosen.

I found that quite liberating, because I think in my work up until that point I used to say, *I can see the thing I want to make, I am going to go through the steps to make that thing*. It became quite predictable, and I got quite

bored with its predictability. There was no satisfaction in accomplishing it because I knew I could. There might be some technical challenges, but once they were dealt with you knew you could do it. The risk was knowing when to stop; it became more about the empty spaces or the uniqueness of what might happen in the machine that was not controllable by bits of software. It was more controlled by seeing something and responding dynamically to what was happening at that point and going right, *I could not have predicted that, and the software could not have predicted it, and I am going to stop there and that is enough.*

You see that in everyone's work. Whether it was my Master's course at the Royal College, or elsewhere, you see people becoming quite trance-like during the finishing of the work and you can see they become distanced from responding to the materials. There is a mythological, prayer-like activity when the noise of the hammer keeps going. I think that stepping away from process is what exercise gave me—that space to see the work differently and find more interesting things in it.

Nowadays I'll often go on a cycle to get ideas. If I am trying to work out what is interesting in my head, I'll try and create space by meandering—no planned route, just exploring. Often the exploring of a landscape makes ideas connect in my mind. I have been a competitive cyclist in the past. Generally, if you are really focused on going fast your brain is not full of anything other than, *this is sore, make it stop.* I have often found when racing that the only thing I think about is breathing. That is about it. For work, a lower endurance stamina activity is beneficial. I'll shift the sort of cycle I need to do in order for it to be about work rather than about cycling.

Sometimes you go out with the intent of just cycling very hard. Your body has a limit, and you can't go hard forever. Often on the way back from a ride like that you get a connection or ideas when you are taking your foot off the pedal, off the gas a bit. You have created adrenaline—obviously—there must be some science behind this. There is probably some neural firing that happens. Cycling is highly repetitive. It is pretty simple. I train cyclists as well and people always overcomplicate it. It is just putting one foot in front of another. Don't overcomplicate it—it is just pushing harder on the pedals.

In the same way, a lot of the things I have done in CAD or in digital manufacturing or digital craft work have been about what may seem like a ridiculous amount of time to do something. The digital file preparation may take a month's worth of clicking dots and moving vertices. But you know that if you stick with it, you will eventually get there. In 2019 we did a ridiculous 450-kilometre cycle. As long as you just keep putting one foot in front of the other you eventually get through it. There is that correlation between the repetitive nature of cycling and CAD, where input is generally a click of a left or a right mouse button. It does not have the dynamism of some tools that you might use in a more haptically oriented craft practice. It has that meditative state about it that is similar to cycling.

Timo Rissanen^[25]

Timo Rissanen is an Associate Professor of Fashion and Textiles in the School of Design at the University of Technology Sydney. Rissanen's research sits at the intersections of sustainability, social justice and fashion and textile systems. His art practice focuses on queer materialities through installation and cross-stitch.



Timo Rissanen, Munchique Wood-wren, 2020, cotton aida cloth and cotton embroidery floss, 40 x 40cm, courtesy of the artist.

Timo:

I run all through the year. It is very regimented in that sense. Spring is my favourite time to run because if you get to the park once a week there is a marked shift, which I love observing. I don't run with music. I tried it eight years ago when I started running. I stopped because I nearly got run over a couple of times because I was not aware of my surroundings. I don't want to miss the birds. I have a bird-watching series of embroideries.

The one thing I have never been able to reconcile is the amount of waste large running events produce. It makes me physically sick to see the waste from the New York City marathon. Dunkin' Donuts sponsors the event, so they give out acrylic knit beanies. For the first few miles you see orange and purple beanies strewn across the side of the road that will still be there in a hundred, a thousand years from now.

With marathons and even a two-hour run there is a connection for me with cross-stitch. You really have to deal with your mind. For me that is the parallel: being OK with something that takes a long time, which some people are not. I don't say that with any type of value judgement, but I have noticed that some artist friends just churn out work. I take eight months to make one thing! I have to remind myself that what they do works for them, and I do what works for me. For me it is about the concentration and training oneself for patience. Marathons can get very boring—mine are roughly around the 4-hour mark. The fastest I ever did was 3 hours 40 minutes—but most of them have been either side of 4 hours and there have been times at the 3-hour mark when I thought, *I have to do another hour of this?*

I will have a long run in the morning and stitch in the afternoon. It is good rest for the legs. Confession time: sometimes I avoid opening certain emails if I know they are not going to be good, and I save them for reading just before my run so I can use it for whatever crap might be in the email. I use the run to process it.

The nice thing about stitching is that I do not need a big studio to work. I literally can do it on my bed. There is a family connection. I have memories of my grandmother doing crochet and making bobbin lace: patience. There is something about having watched her crochet a bedspread—I have one in storage—because she made one for all of her daughters, including mum. It is really fine cotton crochet, and it took her most of a summer to make

one. There is something about that patience. It is OK for me to work on something for 300 hours and trust that there will be something of value.

Something that I struggle with are my incomplete projects. I just look at them and think, *that is crap and I spent so much time*. Sometimes there is value in finishing it as a gateway to get to something better. But I need to go through it. Running is mostly about instant gratification for me. I have never been systematic about training for a marathon. I'd like to do one more marathon to say I have done 15—it just sounds more complete. But I think I would train.

Karin Roy Andersson^[26]

Karin Roy Andersson works with contemporary jewellery, as a maker and as a co-director of gallery Four in Gothenburg, which focuses on jewellery. Her work is characterised by repetitions and the reuse of material, and she currently focuses on leftover reindeer skin from shoe and bag production.



Figure 8 Karin Roy Andersson, Thinking of Vincent XII, 2023, brooch, naturally tanned reindeer skin, brass, thread, steel. 12 x 12 x 2 cm, courtesy of the artist.

Karin:

Most of my jewellery pieces are about repetition. One of the reasons is probably that I find a kind of security in knowing that the work will continue at a slow pace—that I will be doing it for a long, long time. It is tough sometimes, but I can see beyond that. Maybe I want to run from it, but I know that I just have to keep on doing it, and that after a while it will feel easier. Time goes on and I get the kilometres behind me, or I get the work done. Running is very much about stubbornness; you don't give up.

One thing I like about running is that it puts other things in perspective. Of course, there are periods when I move quite easily and it is enjoyable, but most of the time I would say, *I would quit if...* When I am doing it, I always think, *what is the rest of my day going to look like?* When I am running, my thoughts turn to, *that will be fun to do later*, even with things that I think are hard.

I go out running and whatever I have in my head comes up. It is a nice way of solving problems, because you think a little bit about something, you get distracted and focus on breathing and how many more kilometres you have left. Then all of a sudden you go back to the problem and think a little more about it, then put it to the back of your mind again. Sometimes ideas come up out of the blue or I find a solution to a problem. I think it is a really useful strategy; something is happening maybe even more than when I'm just sitting down focusing on solving a problem.

I think I get some sort of kick from running and am more able to concentrate afterwards. Of course, my legs can feel tired but in my head I feel much more alert than if I don't run. I run alone most of the time. Sometimes I call my parents and we talk or do a quiz while I am running. But 90% of the time I run by myself. Two years ago, I would avoid a running invitation unless I knew the group were running slower than my usual pace. Even then I would avoid it. Lately, I have discovered it can be nice. I still don't really like to make an appointment for a run. Jewellery making requires sitting and working, sometimes in quite bad positions, quite monotonous work. I think moving and doing some physical exercise really helps keep you pain-free.

I both love and hate running. It is really both to me. I love it when it feels good, but there are a lot of times when I ask myself, *why am I doing this?* during an early morning in November, when the rain is pouring down and it is completely black outside. But lately this almost makes it better. I run in the silent forest, take a short swim in a black, cold lake and I feel like an animal or Gollum. It definitely gives me a kick. If I run too fast or go to the gym for strength training, then I get too concentrated on the physical pain. Then I don't get the problem-solving part of it. I have a very hard time running on tracks because I am just focused on counting the seconds. Away from the track you have the downslopes with more time for thinking, and then a path goes uphill, and you have to focus on the running—a dynamic that works well for creative thinking.

Anna Von Mertens^[27]

Visual artist Anna Von Mertens's medium is, perhaps, attention. She turns her attention to everyday details—the arrangement of emoji icons on our phones, for instance, scientific phenomena such as drought cycles shown in ancient tree-ring growth that align with the fall of empires, or artefacts captured in emulsion produced by starlight warping as it passes through a telescope's lens. Manifest in the labour of her meticulous drawings and hand-stitched quilts, Von Mertens's focus reveals the entwining of natural processes and human work.



Figure 9A Anna Von Mertens, View V from the series Shape/View, 2016, hand-stitched cotton, 150 x 119 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery. Photo by Jade Nguyen.

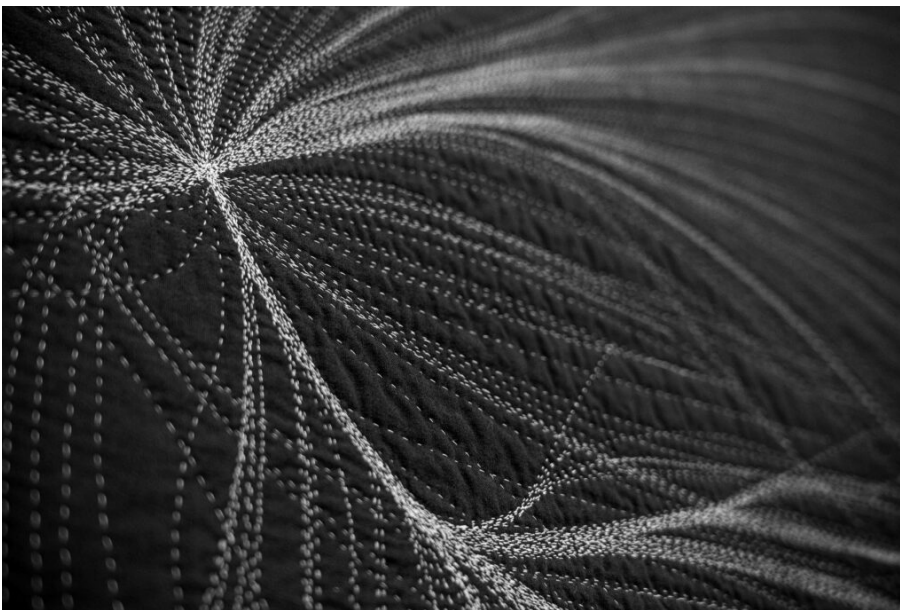


Figure 9B Anna Von Mertens, View V from the series Shape/View (detail), 2016, hand-stitched cotton. Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery. Photo by Jade Nguyen.

Anna:

I grew up playing sports—I was named most valuable athlete at my high school senior year! Sports were important to me. I always knew I wanted to be an artist—art was always a primary line, but sports were as well. I remember being in grad school and there was a guy who played baseball, a lot of his drawings were around baseball, and we bonded about both being jocks. Having a sports background was certainly not typical for an art student. When I transitioned out of team sports in my 30s, I started doing yoga. I recently became a certified yoga teacher, so now I teach along with my own practice. It's interesting that I have only embraced these two lines converging recently—what happens on my yoga mat and what happens in the art studio. Obviously, my art practice has always been informed by my life. I wonder if because I have a craft practice but emphasise the conceptual I felt a need to separate them. Maybe it came from a defensive perspective, but now I am really

embracing how the two practices feed each other.

I'll skip to the present: I was making this enormous drawing—drawing these emoji symbols over and over and over again. I was a little sheepish and embarrassed about it. Partly because I really enjoyed it—*what is wrong with me?*! It was not like I was trying to torture myself. I like the repetition. It wasn't hard to stay interested. Each time I get on my yoga mat I'm not trying to invent something brand new. The whole point is that these poses have been taken for millennia, but each time I am in a pose I investigate what is new, what is different, what is the same. Just like I do when making work.

Solitary practice is interesting. I have always seen it as a personality thing. I am someone who loves to go into my studio and see no one for hours. My husband is more of a social exerciser. I used to run, but I would never call someone to go running with me. I like repetition because it is a cycle. The arc of a run is that first step and then the warm-up and hitting that stride and then the cool down and knowing the next day it will happen again. I feel that happens with craft too. An idea is brewing, a warm-up, and then the making and the repetition can be a kind of endurance, and then that satisfaction of hitting the finish line. You need to ride the energy of that cycle: the excitement, the boredom, all of it. Like that enormous emoji drawing, that was such a ridiculous undertaking. I knew where I was heading and I just had to march towards that and see what happened along the way. It is similar to showing up on your yoga mat and noticing what happens. There is commitment and you have to have discipline.

Walking and yoga are something I now do every day. Time is precious when you have kids and I used to wonder if exercising was how I should spend my time. I felt pressure to be in the studio. But walking really does help me digest ideas. The rhythm of the body moving is calming. It helps me figure out if an idea is good or not. Plus, it is so helpful mentally. We all know that it is a mood elevator. For me, being on the more depressive side of things, a walk is almost mandatory.

Walking and yoga are different. Yoga for me is more about a meditative steadiness to calm the mind, while walking is all about processing; new ideas percolating. Right now, I'm feeling daunted because I just completed a body of work, so now it is just clear blue sky. I have no idea what I'm going to do next. In that kind of space, I try to keep as open as possible to see what shows up. I can't just sit and figure that out. Walking sets a rhythm and helps me stay open. When I finish a body of work I like to crystallise and clarify for myself what that work was about. It helps me find the next idea. I live near country roads so I even walk and talk to myself!

In my yoga practice the mind rests on the breath. I am constantly practising the mind *not* to think. It is more about clearing the mind and practising focus. Walking is an opening of the mind so it can receive or process ideas. They are two very different things. But both use repetition. I have the same walk, the same routine—from the house it's 40 minutes. 40 minutes is always easy to find in my day. The same route means you know its trajectory, the same up- and downhills. The familiar allows for more openness. When something is new, your mind is processing that new information. The familiar allows you to process something else. You can work through an idea.

Repetition could be thought of as just more of the same, but it isn't that at all. I repeat something to see how it is different. When drawing the emojis, the first one I see for the first time and I have to really figure out what I'm seeing. But when I am drawing something for the thirtieth time, I have to check myself—what am I doing just out of habit and how I can reengage it. I can make really different decisions on different days. I use colour pencil so I can't be lazy, I can't erase—I have to really pay attention. I have to be totally present. With yoga, you realise

there is pleasure in concentrating. We actually crave concentration, and it's not easy to achieve. You have to practice. I don't want to run ¼ of a mile or pick up my sewing for only 20 minutes and then put it down again. That's not enough time for concentration, you don't hit your stride.

Conclusion

Andrew Sparks asks, “[h]ow might we write so that we shrink the distance between the experiencing subject and their accounts of lived experience?”^[28] In this enquiry, I have not found the need to fictionalise accounts, which Sparks advocates as a legitimate tool for social scientists to consider. Instead, I have edited lengthy conversations for clarity and concision.^[29] While I cannot deny the influence of my literary eye in the editing of material, my sincere intention is the preservation of each individual's voice rather than a tidy accumulation of quotes. I focused on the experiences of craft practitioners because of my interest in the place of craft in contemporary life. But examples of work that require repetition and deserve concentration arguably also appear far beyond the crafts and I do not claim these observations are pertinent exclusively to craft practices.^[30]

Exposing the productive space of solitary time was the second interest of this enquiry. Working in a period of seemingly endless academic enthusiasm for collaboration, solitary pursuits feel increasingly difficult to justify. While I do not deny the potential some collaborations can offer, my interest is in the renewal of recognition for the powerful and productive place solitary time can also offer. Making and moving alone are evoked as a positive and often necessary in these conversations. My aim, which I disclose unashamedly, has been to expose solitary physical exercise as an elected and effective approach used by some craft practitioners to cultivate their studio work.

Recurring themes appear across these narrative accounts. Some are physical, such as invited bodily fatigue aiding sedentary studio concentration and endurance developed through exercise (Collins, Lawty, Masterton, Rissanen), which is particularly put to use in the production of projects that are daunting in terms of scale or investment of time (Barber, Collins, Eden, Lawty, Masterton, Rissanen and Roy Andersson). Others are psychological, such as attributes of perseverance, patience, concentration and an acquired taste for delayed gratification (Barber, Lawty, Rissanen, Roy Andersson and Von Mertens). Exertion at the limits of the body's stamina leaves little space for thinking beyond the moment compared to the thinking experienced on a familiar route at a comfortable pace (Barber, Collins, Eden, Kular, Masterton, and Roy Andersson). This awareness is deployed by some with considerable intention, depending on the place they find themselves within a project.

The body in motion is known to release endorphins, associated with the mythic runners' high. The weaver and academic Tim Parry-Williams has referred to the importance of experiencing “making endorphins” in the context of academic research, where researchers' time is often sucked away from the studio.^[31] For craft practices that work with digital tools, craft practitioners following meeting-heavy academic career paths, or individuals running their own businesses “making endorphins” aren't always accessible on a daily basis. One further reason to pursue endorphins through the body in motion before returning to the task at hand.

But I have been sitting now for far too long. It is time again to lace up my running shoes...

Footnotes

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14. The benefits of exercise to enhance creative thinking is a mainstream media topic that has experienced increased airtime in the past decade. Examples that overlap with craft discourse include Alex Lockwood's "How to achieve a state of flow when running". Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/the-running-blog/2014/jan/14/achieve-state-flow-running-perform-best> (accessed 2023-12-28). More recently, *The New York Times* writer John Branch opened an article with the line "Wang Ping is a poet by profession and a rower by routine" before mapping the ways Ping's rowing feeds her poetry practice. See Branch, John. "A Long, Shining River of Verse,

- Flowing From a Rower and Writer”. *The New York Times*. 17 July 2023. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/17/sports/poet-rower-wang-ping.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare> (accessed 2023-07-17).
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 19. Eden, Michael. Zoom interview with the author, 27 July 2020.
 20. Kular, Onkar. Zoom interview with the author, 13 August 2020.
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