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Dr. Lisa Stansbie
Head of Art and Communication University of Huddersfield

Extreme Exposures: The practice and narratives of channel swimming as a methodology for the creation of contemporary art

Abstract

This presentation discusses the theoretical framework and methodology behind a recent (2012) body of artwork. The work is the result of a three month research sabbatical from The University of Huddersfield that investigates the narratives, processes, rituals and apparatus of the sport of open water swimming with a focus on the 'cult' of channel swimming, in particular the necessity for learned behaviours, collective interaction and the identity of the channel swimmer.

'Interaction amongst peers can lead to an excessive commitment to action' (Hughes and Coakley 1991)

The work combines both object based sculpture, photography, drawing and films that utilise an experiential approach to the research of the sport by a direct involvement. Documentary processes and re-enactment are engaged, with myself as subject of the study in the video series *Acclimatisation* (2012). The piece documents the body's physical response to cold-water immersion and the method of acclimatising (habituation) over a set period of time, a process that is core to channel swimming training. This piece in particular reflects aspects of 'positive deviant' behaviour (Ewald and Jobu, 1985) where there is an over commitment to extending the action (Hughes and Coakley 1991) undertaken by extreme athletes. Links between practices of endurance art and acclimatisation are described.

Sandettie Lightship (2012) *Shipping Lane* (2012) and *Standard Relay* (2012) are part of a series of sculptural photographs and film made from the same apparatus and materials that channel swimmers use to feed during a swim. The repetitive time-based behaviour of 'the feed' and how it is administered is part of the learned channel swimmer behaviour and the self-made feeding constructions become an essential object within the performance of the swim. The constructed sculptures become semi abstract, retaining traces of their function but are further distanced and transposed from their origin as a channel swimming feeder via the medium of film, the editing of which reflects the time-based measuring of the duration of a swim. The series *Channel Swimwear Rules* (2012) consists of self-portraits of the swimmer wearing all the equipment disallowed when swimming the channel, researching the relationship between the authentic body and the use of technology to enhance performance.

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Head of Art and Communication University of Huddersfield

Extreme Exposures: The practice and narratives of channel swimming as a methodology for the creation of contemporary art

Introduction: The Sport of Channel Swimming

In order for the relationship between art and sport that is used within this research to be discussed, it is important to state exactly what the minority sport of 'Channel swimming' involves. Channel swimming is defined as swimming the English Channel, the body of water between England and France that is approximately 21 miles in distance.¹

The English Channel is seen as a particularly difficult body of water to attempt to swim across due to a number of factors. It is very unpredictable with continuously changing tides and currents. It is also one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world with around 600 ships moving up and down each day, so safe navigation between and around these vessels is key to the swim. The temperature of the water in the channel ranges from 14c – 18c during the channel swimming season (to put this into context a public swimming pool temperature is usually 28c – 30c). There is also a season for swimming the channel, which runs from June to October each year.

An average swim crossing takes a swimmer about 13 hours of continuous swimming. The cost of a channel swim is currently around £2500. This covers the pilot and his boat, two central elements of the swim, as it is the pilot's skill in navigation that will mean a swimmer hits tides at the right time...and does not hit ships! The cost also covers relevant insurances and ratification costs, so that the swim fulfils the rules as set out by one of the two organisations that oversee channel swimming, The Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation or Channel Swimming Association. As a swimmer you cannot swim the channel legally outside these two official bodies.

Swims are usually booked with the pilot and relevant association around 2-3 years in advance, allowing the ideal amount of time to train. Not just any swimmer can swim the channel either, solo swimmers must qualify to swim the channel and present evidence of this by swimming for 6 hours in water that is of a temperature of 16c or below and relay swimmers by swimming for 2 hours in the same temperature.

The development into a channel swimmer is one of training the body, learning the behaviour, rituals, language and becoming part of the channel swimming community. This communal experience manifests itself quite clearly in the Dover channel training. Channel swimmers have the option of training at Dover harbour beach in the UK from May to September each year, swimming in the sea at this location. There are a group of volunteers who run training every weekend, giving advice on timings/planning, feeding and the swim itself. It is at this training where there is a real sense of a channel swimming community, feats of swimming endurance are undertaken, personal limits pushed, camaraderie developed and successful swimmers congratulated. The training is overseen by The Channel General, Freda Streeter, who has trained channel swimmers for over 20 years. She is the mother of Alison Streeter, known as 'Queen of the Channel' because she has swum the English Channel a total

of 43 times. ‘Sitting’ next to this Queen on the thrones of channel swimming is Kevin Murphy, ‘The King of The Channel’, having crossed it a total of 34 times.

*Image: The King of The Channel (2012) Yellow neon Glass Sculpture.

Elizabeth Matheson and Emelie Chhangur in their 2010 article on the artist Humberto Velez discuss his 2010 swimming project Le Saut (Paris Plunge) in which the Seine plays stage to swimmers attempting to swim against its current. In bringing together diverse individuals from a variety of backgrounds and nationalities to swim she says:

...one is immediately reminded of the earnest aesthetics of sport: the multiplication of perspectives and the embrace of contingency, collaboration and communal action. Whatever their political efficacy (and it can be very little), these aesthetics at least could succeed in occupying space in Paris, imprinting themselves on the city. Which is, of course, what art and sport both claim to do. (Matheson, 2010: p. 37)

The swimmers are staged as swimming ‘against’ the governing rules of society (particularly as swimming in the Seine is banned). This embrace of the collective and communal action shares affinities with Nicolas Bourriaud’s notion of relational-aesthetics (1998) involving human interaction and social interstice as art practice. The ‘communal’ is also central to the seemingly lonely sport of channel swimming via the training grounds and forums that form the channel-swimming community and connect it materially and virtually worldwide. ⁱⁱ

The sport of channel swimming also significantly calls into question the traditional aesthetics of the athlete’s body as an instrument of athletic prowess and perfection. A successful channel swimmer from Dover harbour training beach commented to me during a training weekend that “In channel swimming portliness is next to Godliness”. The enduring aspect of the swim is not just the continued long duration of the swimming itself, alongside this cold water tolerance plays a significant part in the swim. This can mean that swimmers need to put weight on so they have more insulation against the cold.

Throsby (2013) investigates the processes of becoming a channel swimmer through her own experience of doing so. Throsby found that in relation to gender and the body in channel swimming female swimmers were viewed as possessing sporting advantages:

...as explanations of high performance, women are also often credited with a biological advantage in swimming - for example, because of higher average levels of body fat [and] a presumed (but scientifically unproven) higher tolerance for pain. (Throsby 2013: p.2)

Throsby draws distinctions between types of fat and terms this gaining of weight for channel swims a form of “heroic fatness”, a fatness that can be lost after the event and is a temporary form of body modification. ‘Heroic fatness’ is a controllable body adaption that is ‘necessary but undesirable’ and perceived as morally different to ‘normal’ fatness.

Introduction: Contemporary Art and Sport

...in my search for texts on sports and art, I began to suspect at some point that , at least since the 1990's the relationship between the two was one of mutual scepticism or lack of interest (Jahn, 2006: p. 17)

As author of the artworks my overarching position between the two disciplines of art and sport involves the delineation between the sportsperson and artist. Multi disciplinary methods using theoretical frameworks from philosophy, sociology, sports science and art are used in a trans-disciplinary way throughout this paper.

The artwork seeks to eradicate the boundaries between the disciplines of sport and art, so that the resulting artworks are informed by the swimming experiences (in the gallery based works) while the potential exists for the acts of swimming endurance (such as the channel swim and its training) in themselves being considered art works. The enduring act of a channel swim indeed shares many similarities with endurance performance art works such as the work of the artist Marina Abramovicⁱⁱⁱ. The training and mental preparation required for physically demanding symbolic feats are also comparable.

Proposing the act of the swim as art in itself is consistent with Alan Kaprow's thoughts in the book The Blurring of Art and Life (2003) where he questions the nature of art and its reception. As a young student in 1949 Kaprow questioned John Dewey's writing on Art as Experience by stating "...art is not separate from experience...what is an authentic experience?...environment is a process of interaction" (Kelley, 2003: p. xvii). Kaprow goes on to suggest that the Happening^{iv} is an ideal vehicle for art and life encounters and interestingly Kaprow was also of the belief that for a Happening to maintain its originality it should be a one-off, with no publicity and staged in a multitude of non-gallery environments that integrated the landscape within the performance. The audience was also reduced, usually only a handful of people and 'accidental' participants who happened to be in the location at the time. This distancing from the accepted confines of the art world is described by Kaprow as "...un-arding...I define it as that act or thought whose identity as art must forever remain unknown" (Kaprow, 2003: p. xxix). The intention of the channel swimmer is not to 'make art', but the artist who swims the channel as performance is starting from a different perspective. The happening of the channel swim takes place in an unpredictable environment continually in a state of flux, with unexpected, unscripted events unfolding. There is also a lack of an apparent audience, aside from the crew and pilot, who are themselves subjects within the performance. Each crew member has a pre-stated (by the swimmer) set of tasks to undertake at specific times during the swim, such as organising hourly feeds and observing the number of swimming strokes per hour^v.

*Image: Sandettie Lightship (2012) Photograph of sculpture based on the weather station positioned in the English channel, that swimmers use to try and predict the weather for a swim.

The relationship between artist and sportsperson is one that continues to be full of tension and ambiguities. For the most part artists that have created work around sport do so often through residencies that may involve researching, examining the sport

from an objective viewpoint of observation and documentation. With my body of work the immersion and sustained contact makes it difficult to extricate the ending and beginning of the two areas of sport and art in (myself as) the author and so a hybrid approach is taken whereby my position slips between artist observer, artist as subject and creative sportswoman. An analogy could be used that draws on recent notions around creative research, which are termed 'practice-based' and 'practice-led'. The methodology used in this body of work is sport 'in' art rather than 'through' it.

As a sporting subject I am also tenuously placed in the Channel swimming community, having trained for and swum a channel relay (a standard relay is six swimmers each swimming for an hour at a time) but not having swum the channel solo, my position is one of slippage, remaining accepted, but not with the necessary "solo" honour, sometimes referred to after a successful solo as being 'welcomed to the club'.

In a similar position of hybridity, albeit with a more deliberate distancing, Leanne Shapton, author and illustrator draws on her own swimming experience from a distance, which creates a sense of nostalgia. It is applicable, when considering her book Swimming Studies (2012) that "nostalgia" in Greek literally means "the wounds of returning". Shapton's book is based on her own experiences of training and competing at a high level internationally in swimming and her fondness for drawing. It contains intimate recollections that detail the personal narratives via text and visuals. Swimming Studies demonstrates that the artist and athlete are not incompatible opposites and in Shapton's case the repetitive habitual nature of swimming she likens to the mental endurance needed for the processes of drawing within her creative life. Here the notion of a learned practice with defined common languages could be seen to connect sport and the practice of making art. The notion of a practice that is practised.

Trying to define what swimming means to me is like looking at a shell sitting in a few feet of clear, still water. There it is, in sharp focus, but once I reach for it, breaking the surface, the ripples refract the shell. It becomes five shells, twenty-five shells, some smaller, some larger and I blindly feel for what I saw perfectly before trying to grasp it (Shapton, 2012: p. 1)

Training Grounds

There are specific systematic and tested processes of preparation for channel swimming (unlike the more generalised sport of open water swimming) and at the forefront of preparation is a testing of the body's limits to deal with cold water. This is commonly known as 'acclimatisation' and 'habituation'. This process differs from other forms of outdoor swimming as within the sport of channel swimming the swimmer is not permitted to wear a wetsuit, which would aid heat retention.

Habituation is a learning process whereby the body learns to adapt to dealing with the shock of getting into cold water. Acclimatisation however is the process whereby the body gets used to being in and staying in cold water for gradually longer periods of time. In order to undertake both the body is forced to go through (often painful) experiences.

Makenin (2010) explained it as:

habituation is the most common form of cold adaptation and develops in response to repeated cold exposures where whole-body cooling is not substantial. When being habituated to cold, thermal cold sensations are less intense and shivering and the vasoconstrictor response is blunted.

Makenin also suggests in the same article that mental perception of coldness plays a significant part in the body's reaction to it. 'At the same time stress responses are reduced, meaning a lesser rise in blood pressure (BP) and reduced release of stress hormones in the circulation' (Makenin, 2010).

*Image: Training Ground: Tooting Bec Lido (Film Still) 2012.

These processes of acclimatisation and habituation can be viewed as extreme by those outside the sport. This aspect of training pushes the body to its physical limits and minor hypothermia is an accepted occurrence while undertaking such training. Within channel training swimmers are taught (mostly by each other and more formally during structured training) to understand signs of hypothermia and processes to reduce the symptoms. Hughes and Coakley (1991) discuss in their "Positive Deviance" essay the notion that athletes behaviour can be classed as deviant as peer/community pressure encourages overconformity and collective encouragement to push limits. They outline the 'sport ethic' and how this is used to excess. 'Much deviance amongst athletes involves excessive over-conformity to the norms and values embodied in the sport itself' (Hughes & Coakley, 1993: p. 361) and that positive deviance within sport can be caused by '...an unqualified acceptance of and an unquestioned commitment to a value system framed by what we refer to as the sport ethic' (Hughes & Coakley, 1993: p. 362).

In channel swimming certain aspects of training can be conceptually framed by this notion of positive deviance. Elements of the swimming challenge that are trained for, including exhaustive long periods of swimming and time spent in cold water take place in group situations. Often the group training (including the Dover beach weekly training) encourages excessive commitment to what might be viewed outside the community as seemingly positive deviant behaviour.

When viewed outside the channel swimming community (and wider open water swimming sport) my video documentation Acclimatisation (2012) that documents the after effects (known as after drop, the continued fall of the body temperature during the re-warming process) of attempting to acclimatise to cold water swimming over a period of weeks is viewed as deviant and has been questioned due to the severity of my condition in the video. When displayed within the open water and channel swimming community the body state is immediately recognised and viewed as comedic (swimmers refer affectionately to this after swim state as having the "shakes").

This piece is the first self-referential work within the body of research and perhaps the piece that most obviously disrupts the boundaries of artist and swimmer. As a central subject within this documentary film, the filming processes are deliberately

homemade, scenes being filmed on hand held mobile devices. In many ways the use of hand held filming devices has become a ubiquitous documentary format and the documentary artist film becomes one that is contained in multiple mobile formats and is transposable (differing from the authentic unique art object) and its aesthetic recognised as of the moment. This format allows for films to be shown (and uploaded) into different contexts and discipline specific domains, encapsulating the multiple identities of the author.

This also allows for a lack of direction within the film and for the device itself to literally create the impression of ‘the shakes’ as my inability to hold the camera is evident (adding to the comedic aspect of the film). Individual ritual is also evidenced in the wearing of the same hat in each clip (and also the hat being recognised as being mine in the swimming community worldwide, capitalising on my swimmer identity). This oversized hat is intended to retain heat after the cold immersion but its seemingly ridiculous appearance adds to the unnatural scenario of each video and its recognition by viewers as an emblem moves it to become a totemic object.

Within channel swimming the ethics of the sport also culminate in encouragement in collectively seeing the adversity of the challenge through the use of popular channel swimming sayings and slogans that reinforce this deviance and a sense of collective belonging: “No Pain No Gain” and “Nothing Great is Easy” and “80 per cent mental, 20 per cent physical”.

Rituals

Greasing up, is a term used in the channel swimming (and open water swimming) community to signal a process of covering the body with either Vaseline or a similar anti-chaffing product. Historically channel swimmers were known for wearing ‘goose-fat’ and this was perceived as keeping a swimmer warm during the swim. This act of greasing at the start of a swim, can appear through the lens as ritualistic with a laying of hands on the body (usually at night time when a channel swim begins). In the stills from Nick Adams video, when removed from their swimming context, they appear to acquire a quasi-religious ceremonial significance.

*Image: Greasing Up (Nick Adams) Stills from Nick Adams channel swimming video 2011.

The enduring act of the channel swim requires the body to adapt and perform the associated learning behaviours of channel training. This includes the internal body in the form of “feeding” as the endurance aspect requires the body to refuel in a particular and sequential way and, according to the channel swimming rules, without touching the boat. Throsby (2012) describes her channel swim and feeding patterns as part of her blog;

“Three feeds ago, my boat pilot had come out of the cabin to tell me that it was time for some hard effort now to push through the difficult tide” (Throsby, 2012).

The channel swim, while underway, is measured by the participant swimmer by feeds. The hourly feeds (sometimes more often, however often the swimmer has decided prior to the swim will work best for their body) become a measure of progress. The

feeds each act as temporal points within the swim to create an overall timescape, the passing of time is measured by the body's need to refuel and the early stages of the channel swim are judged to be successful depending on the swimmer's ability to digest the feed^{vi}. In this context, Descarte's idea of the 'body as a machine' could be seen as an appropriate equivalence, with the body as an engine to be kept fuelled for the task at hand.

Each swimmer also selects (and sometimes makes) their own apparatus for feeding so as not to touch the boat when they need to stop hourly for a feed. These items are tested prior to the swim and may also relate to the personal choices of the swimmer. For instance a 'basket and pole' system is more appropriate for solid foods, while sports bottles on rope or string allow for liquid fuel. These appropriated objects take on a sculptural presence and become a symbolic object during the swim, the appearance of these objects also marking a passing of time and the only point during a swim where there is a bridging between the swimmer and boat.

*Image: Standard Relay (2012) Sculpture based on swimmer's homemade feeding apparatus.

In Standard Relay (2012) (both a sculptural piece and a film of the sculpture) the constructed sculpture becomes semi abstract, retaining traces of its function but it is further distanced and transposed from its origin (as a channel swimming feeder) via the medium of film, the editing of which reflects the time-based measuring of the duration of a swim. An inertia exists in the slow panning shots which create obvious sequencing with little action, a repetitive imagery in which the feeding sculpture dominates and is centralised as an iconic object. This is at odds with the multi-layered abstract sound that is present within the film. The sound is constructed using a methodology applied to production of the audio that includes processes of capture (from an actual swim) to the treatment and collaging via digital processes. The placement of sounds alongside the visuals therefore generates a relationship between imagery and sound that is integral to the film itself, and produces a sense of temporal points relevant to stages of the swim and suggests repetitive processes.

The Authentic Body: Channel Swimwear Rules

During a channel swim the body is expected to be in a natural state, free from the technology of any enhancing equipment, evidencing the physical capabilities of the swimmer. With the rise in performance enhancing equipment rules have been developed as to what a 'legal' channel swim can involve. These rules referred to as EC (English Channel) Rules are used in open water swimming worldwide and originated from this sport.

No swimmer in a standard attempt to swim the Channel shall be permitted to use or wear any device or swimsuit that may aid his/her speed, buoyancy, heat retention or endurance (such as wetsuit, webbed gloves, paddles, fins, etc).

The swimmer is permitted to grease the body before a swim, use goggles and one hat. Nose clips and earplugs are permitted. Any kind of tape on the body is not permitted unless approved by the observer.

The swimmer may wear only one swimsuit in one or two pieces which shall not extend past the shoulder or below the knee. All swimsuits shall be made

from textile materials. Caps may not be made from neoprene or any other material which offers similar heat retention properties. (CS&PF website 2012)

Magdalinski (2009) discusses how the physiological body can be enhanced through technology and how processes of bodily changes and adaption have to be earned within sport. Once, therefore, that “equipment” is utilised to enhance performance this can be viewed as technology interfering with the natural sporting body and results in a tension arising between “nature” and “technology”. Within channel swimming this use of equipment is viewed as ‘cheating’ and because of this channel swimming is distinctive from other open water events and challenges that may require participants to wear wetsuits (linked to the rise in triathlon).

*Image: Channel Swimwear Rules (2012) Photographs with swimmer wearing all banned channel-swimming equipment.

With the work Channel Swimwear Rules (2012) two large-scale photographs display a swimmer wearing the banned equipment for a channel swim and the aesthetic construction of the pieces are created using appropriated wetsuit advertising methods and stances. The imagery suggests an exaggerated level of body-enhancement, the binary opposite of the natural body and illustrates the seemingly comedic dimension to many of the artificial aids when viewed outside the context of a swimming community (and indeed outside the water environment the enhancements are designed for).

The work has been exhibited in a ‘non-art’ sporting situation at The Global Open Water Swimming Conference 2012 in Los Angeles where it was often ‘misread’ as advertising rather than contemporary artwork. These readings disrupt the relationship between the disciplines of art and sport and facilitate a mixing of codes recognised within each sphere.

Hitting France

“...an ethnographic mapping of an institution or community is a primary form of site-specific art today” (Foster, 1996: p.185)

An ethnographic approach provides the overarching framework used in the work, although rather than the artist presenting collected data based on the channel swimming community, the data is transcribed and often reframed into artworks. Objects are not appropriated and represented. This approach has the potential to perhaps enable insight into the sport and consider wider notions of identity itself.

Hal Foster (1996) states that artists are often defined by their habitation of elsewhere and acting as the ‘other’. He comments on artists working in an ethnographic manner who work horizontally

...one selects a site, enters its culture and learns its language, conceives and presents a project, only to move to the next site where the cycle is repeated. (Foster, 1996: p. 202).

In this body of research as a subject embedded within the site (community) itself it is difficult to work horizontally, and the vertical approach, of becoming involved in depth within one site, while enabling unlimited access, could problematise my position that then becomes distanced from 'the other'. It could be said there is too little objective space in my representations, by my very implication and familiarity with channel swimming culture as a sports person.

The artist therefore is in a space of intersection, involved in the sport, but attempting to bridge both the subjective and objective artist positions. This is what allows the work to be both informed by and testing the methodologies of the sport itself, it has potential to question the two apparently divergent disciplines of art and sport.

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ⁱ The first person to successfully swim the English Channel without artificial aids was Captain Matthew Webb in 1875.

ⁱⁱ There is a worldwide channel swimming forum/chat group with 1200 members internationally

ⁱⁱⁱ Abramovic calls these preparations before performances 'cleaning the house' literally preparing herself mentally and physically for the performances that push the body to extremes. The preparation involves a range of processes including meditation, fasting and acts of long durational concentration and silence.

^{iv} A Happening is a performance considered art. It can take place in any chosen situation and is overseen by an artist or group. Happenings are often improvised and may involve audience participation. The term was created by Alan Kaprow in 1957.

^v A technique used during a channel swim to ascertain the speed, efficiency and endurance of the swimmer is to count how many strokes a minute a swimmer uses. A stroke is considered one arm turn. In Channel swimming if the stroke rate drops, it is generally a sign the swimmer is getting tired.

^{vi} Prior to undertaking the swim, the channel swimmer will practice feeding with carbohydrate energy drinks. These drinks are often difficult to digest and different strengths of the substance are experimented with. Ideally a swimmer must aim not to vomit as this is detrimental to gaining the required calories needed for the swim. It is accepted by swimmers undertaking a channel swim, that they are most likely to vomit a number of times during the swim.