



# Performance Research

## A Journal of the Performing Arts

ISSN: 1352-8165 (Print) 1469-9990 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprs20>

## Found Constraints and Followed Contours

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To cite this article: Curt Cloninger (2019) Found Constraints and Followed Contours, Performance Research, 24:2, 8-15, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2019.1624021](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2019.1624021)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2019.1624021>



Published online: 25 Jul 2019.

# Found Constraints and Followed Contours

## The Barkley Marathons

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The Barkley Marathons is an infamously challenging endurance trail race, having only been completed by fifteen runners in its thirty-year history. More relevant than its difficulty, however, are the numerous ways in which the race purposefully incorporates the peculiarities of its site. The Barkley (as it is known) is an extremely site-specific event, not because its location is any more 'authentic', 'particular' or 'idiosyncratic' than any other mountain race location, but because, perhaps more than any race, the idiosyncrasies of its location have been allowed to dictate the nature of the race. It takes place in the rugged Cumberland Plateau area of the Appalachian Mountains of East Tennessee, in the south-eastern United States. The Barkley is between 100 and 130 miles long (depending on the year), and must be completed in under sixty hours. The rules and traditions of the event are derived from a failed prison break, and an audacious boast that led to the creation of a race that was never meant to be completable. This built-in expectation of participant failure is a key reason the Barkley is such a site-specific event.

Considered as a form of constraint-based endurance performance art, the Barkley Marathons suggests a 'found' approach to performance constraints: an approach that puts performance in a more direct and fine-grained relationship with the specifics (geological, topological, meteorological, botanical, human-historical, non-human-historical) of the world in which (and with which) the performance occurs. Because no human was ever expected to actually complete the race, the founders of the race were less obliged to conform to prior understandings of what a human body could achieve. Consequently, the non-human components of the event (weather, terrain, topology) were allowed more agency and influence on the outcome of the event.

By way of disclaimer, I have never run or even attended the Barkley. I am a distance runner,

a hiker/camper, an endurance performance artist and a media theorist. I happen to live higher up in this same mountain range (somewhere west of Asheville, North Carolina), but that is the extent of my immediate personal involvement with the race. All of my sources are from newspapers, magazines, documentary films (two especially captivating ones), and online archives created by the Barkley community. Fortunately (at least for an academic researcher), the Barkley has become popular enough in recent years to generate ample interviews and source materials.

### RACE ORIGINS AND LOGISTICS

Before getting into my particular theoretical analysis, a simple explanation of the origins and logistics of the Barkley is in order. In the summer of 1977, James Earl Ray (the man who assassinated Martin Luther King Jr.) and six other prisoners escaped from Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary, located deep in the mountains west of Knoxville, Tennessee. Fifty-four hours later, Ray was apprehended hiding in the woods, having only travelled 8 miles from the prison. The two founders of the Barkley (Gary 'Lazarus Lake' Cantrell and Karl 'Raw Dog' Henn) had spent years backpacking in Frozen Head State Park near Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary, and were underwhelmed with Ray's lack of progress. 'Laz' reckoned he could have covered 100 miles in that same amount of time. From this boast, the Barkley eventually emerged (Seminara 2013).

The race began in 1986, and has grown increasingly difficult each year. Currently, to complete the race, five 25-mile marathons have to be run sequentially. The officially advertised 20-mile distance is a conservative estimate: each marathon is probably more like 26 miles (Iltis and Kane 2014), looping over the same course, which must be completed within twelve hours in order to qualify for subsequent loops. This task alone



would be challenging enough on flat ground; but each loop has 13,400 feet of climbing and 13,400 feet of descending, for a total of 67,000 feet of ascent and 67,000 feet of descent. As a point of comparison, Mount Everest is 29,000 feet above sea level. Although the highest point along the course is only a bit over 3,000 feet above sea level, the course is a perpetual barrage of ascents and descents.

Runners may rest and even sleep between loops (or on the trail during loops, for that matter), provided each loop is completed within twelve hours. The actual course route varies from year to year, and is not announced until the day before the race. A minority of the course is on state park hiking trails, but most of the course is routed off the trails and through the uncleared woods, where runners encounter brambles, thickets and the dreaded 'sawbriars' (*Smilax bona-nox*): hard spiky vines that grow from the ground in dense tangles and saw into any shins unfortunate enough to encounter them. Runners may use a magnetic compass and a printed topographical map of the area, but they must copy the actual course route onto their own map from a single master map kept by Laz (the race director). Written but often cryptic instructions (as recollected by various runners) are also supplied by Laz: 'Keep on following the ridge up and climb to the highest point. When it hurts more, you're on the right path', and, 'Turn at this tree that's got three trunks' (Iltis and Kane 2014). No GPS devices,

altimeters or cellphones are allowed. Jugs of water are left at two unmanned locations along the route. Sometimes due to the weather, the water in the jugs freezes (Iltis and Kane 2014). The course is not marked and there are no race officials along the route.

The race begins some time between midnight and noon, but the exact time varies each year. The time is announced an hour prior to the race via the blowing of a conch shell (Seminara 2013). So much for getting a good night's sleep prior to your sixty-hour ordeal. The race occurs at the end of March, during which time the local weather varies from moment to moment, and from ridge to valley. Sometimes it snows, hails, rains, fogs and shines, all on the same day.

Nine to thirteen books (depending on the particular course that year) are placed in strategic locations along the route and serve as unmanned verification checkpoints. The books all have macabre, cheeky titles appropriate to the challenge at hand (*Cold Truth, Death Walks the Woods, The Reason I Won't Be Coming, A Time to Die*). There are new titles each year, all selected by Laz to sardonically 'encourage' runners along the way (Seminara 2013). Each runner is assigned a unique number for each lap, and they must rip out the corresponding page number from each book and return it to Laz at the starting line for verification of completion of that loop. But these pages are not all that verify proper loop completion. The Barkley is a footrace, not an orienteering challenge. The runners must stay on the course, headed in the proper direction (albeit mostly off trail and through the woods), and return to the finish line from the proper direction. They may not simply take any old route through the woods to the next book (although, given the

■ (left, above) Sawbriar. Photo foresterbob  
 ■ (left, below) Sawbriar damage. Photo Annika Iltis and Timothy Kane



■ One of the milestone books. Photo Michael Doyle

■ The river flowing through the tunnel beneath the prison. Photo Matt Mahoney



books' strategic locations and the precipitous topography of the area, a beeline from one book to another would rarely ever be possible).

Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary closed in 2009, and part of the Barkley course currently follows a creek that flows through a dark tunnel beneath the old prison itself. When it rains, the uphill and downhill portions of the course (aka most of the course) become muddy and slippery. When the fog descends, wayfinding becomes nearly impossible. And of course, in order to complete the race, half of it must be run at night. The race begins with all of the participants running in the same direction. The first four loops are run so that two are clockwise and two are counterclockwise. Depending on the year, this sequence could be: clockwise–clockwise–counterclockwise–counterclockwise, clockwise–counterclockwise–clockwise–counterclockwise, etc. All the runners head in the same direction for the first four loops. However, on the last loop, the leading runner gets to choose their desired direction, and every other runner must run in the opposite direction. So, if runners have been relying on each other in groups for wayfinding and support up to that point, they are forced to complete the final loop on their own (Iltis and Kane 2014). This fifth loop directional constraint is often moot, since there are rarely any runners remaining to run the fifth loop. For example, in 2018, the weather was particularly brutal, and only one runner completed the third loop. No runners even began loop four, much less loop five.

The race's application process is as idiosyncratic as the course constraints. Only around forty runners are accepted each year. The application

process is a word-of-mouth secret. You must apply at the right time. If you submit your application early, it is rejected. Runners must submit an essay on why they should be accepted. Runners are accepted based (more or less) on their likelihood to complete the race, but there is always one wildcard runner (the 'sacrificial virgin') who is accepted and not expected to make it to the first book on the first loop (Seminara 2013). Many acclaimed international ultramarathon runners apply to the Barkley, and most fail to complete even the first three loops. There is by no means a direct correlation between success in other 100+ mile endurance races and even finishing the Barkley. For example, Michael Wardian, winner of the World Marathon Challenge (a race comprised of seven marathons on seven continents in seven days) failed to even finish the first Barkley loop (Soong 2017).

#### DEGREES OF SITE-SPECIFICITY IN FOOTRACES

The Barkley Marathons is most notable not simply because of its extreme difficulty – there are hundreds of ultramarathon races designed to be extremely difficult – but because of the many site-specific ways in which it achieves its difficulty. If one were to construct a continuum of site-specificity in footraces, from the least site-specific to the most, then at the least site-specific end of the spectrum would be races run on a flat, standard, oval, 400-metre track (its equivalent in the art world is the white cube gallery). Such tracks are explicitly designed to be site-agnostic. Barring wind-aided races in straight sprints (where a favourable tailwind inordinately improves a sprinter's time, however fractionally), and barring differences in atmospheric oxygen levels based on altitude and differences in temperature based on climate, races run on a 400-metre track in one location are comparable to races run on any other 400-metre track anywhere else in the world. This interchangeability ensures that race times may be fairly compared and world records accurately maintained.

Farther along the spectrum than races run on 400-metre tracks are road races run at discrete and comparable distances (5K, 10K, marathon,



etc.). The Boston Marathon differs from the New York Marathon due to variations in elevation, turns in the course, and road surface conditions. In the case of most marathons, however, the courses all begin and end at the same elevation, the variations in elevation are (relatively) slight throughout the course, and the road surfaces are roughly similar. These similarities are enough to allow comparable world records at these distances to be maintained.

More site-specific still are 5K and 10K cross-country races run through wooded and hilly terrain, but even cross-country races occur on marked and cleared paths. Further along again are fell running races that occur over longer distances, across unmarked highland terrain, up and down mountainous elevations. Yet even fell races are designed with the assumption that, however difficult, at least some of the participants (if not most of them) will complete the race; whereas the Barkley was initially designed so that no one would complete the race. According to Laz, 'All the other big races are set up for you to succeed. The Barkley is set up for you to fail' (Seminara 2013). There is technically a Barkley course time record, but for many runners the goal is simply to complete the first three loops (the distance ironically known as 'the fun run'). For some, the goal is to complete the first lap within the twelve-hour time limit. For others, the goal is simply to complete the first lap at all. One first-time runner (James Adams) described his goals for the Barkley: 'I don't want to be a miserable failure; I just want to be a regular failure like everyone else' (Adams 2018).

Creating a purposefully impossible race allows (or requires, depending on your perspective) the Barkley organizers to include a number of site-specific, event-specific eccentricities and variables that make the Barkley incomparable to other races, and even to itself from year to year. To give just one example: because the race course and distance change somewhat every year, the 2017 Barkley is technically incomparable to the 2018 Barkley the following year. Other variables that contribute to differences from year to year include: start time, start date, drastic weather variations, amount of hill mud due to prior rain, amount of vegetation due to prior clearing (or lack thereof) and the possible shifting of

milestone book locations. These changes in event-specific variables (human-idiosyncratic, topographical, meteorological, vegetational) from year to year lead to drastic changes in event outcomes from year to year. For example, in 2014, five runners completed the fun run (three loops), and one runner completed the full race (five loops). In 2015, two runners completed the fun run, but no one completed the fourth loop. In 2016, three runners completed the fun run, and one completed the full race. In 2017, six runners completed the fun run, and one completed the full race. And in 2018, only one runner completed the fun run, with no one even beginning the fourth loop (Mahoney 2018).

I would argue that the more a race embraces its site-specific particulars, the closer it situates itself towards site-specific performance art; whereas the less a race embraces its site-specific particulars (or attempts to neutralize them altogether), the closer it situates itself towards white cube gallery and black box theatre performance art. All mountain races are forced to at least embrace the site-specific contours and folds of their respective topologies. Whereas flat races are bound to be more comparable to one another in terms of their topologies, and thus less site-specific and particular.

It is important to note that the Barkley is not uniquely and extremely site-specific simply because it is Appalachian. If that were true, then the Barkley could have arisen anywhere else in the Appalachian Mountains, which would departicularize it from this specific area of the Cumberland Foothills surrounding Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary. These specific mountainous woods were chosen by the federal prison system for their isolation and their inescapable, impassable properties. These woods are specifically related to the difficulty of escape from the prison, and thus are intrinsic to the (intended) impossibility of the race itself. It is this impossibility that allows the race to have such a deep relationship with its site, because the race need not conform to the abilities of the generically understood human body. Indeed, the location of the prison and the race were originally chosen to purposefully *confound* the generically understood human body and cause it to fail at running.

Of course, every race anywhere has the opportunity to be just as particular to and contingent upon its own local histories and topologies, but most races choose to bracket the idiosyncrasies of their particular histories and topologies because they are adhering to the generally understood paradigm of what a human footrace is. The more that race organizers bracket (overlook, ignore, choose not to 'find') the potential 'found' constraints of a race's site, the less the haecceitic particulars of that site are invited to affect the performed event of the race. It's not that the Barkley has 'better' particulars (although its particulars are uniquely challenging and brutal, by design): it's that the Barkley has embraced more of its particulars and has purposefully allowed them to affect it as an event.

In general, the more site-specific a race, the less abstractly the race treats the human body. Footraces on a site-agnostic, 400-metre track pit the generically understood running human body against the basic, universal constraint of gravity over consistently flat distance. Whereas a race like the Barkley entangles the particular, immanent human person (disoriented, lonely, sleep-deprived, briar-cut, blistered, dramatically depleted by steep ascents and slippery descents) with the particular, immanent environment through which they run.

As a kind of corollary, Olympic anthropologist John T. MacAloon recounts the story of the Raratmuri people of Chihuahua, Mexico (whose name literally means 'the people who run on foot'), able to run 200 miles without stopping across the challenging terrain of their home territory, but who categorically fail in Olympic footraces. 'Away from their canyons, their comrades, and the bracing ministrations of their sorcerers, put on circular tracks or city streets by trainers with stopwatches and asked to compete with total strangers, the "people who run" don't run very well' (1982: 100). This fact challenges the presumption of a 'site-agnostic' standard track site able to objectively measure abstract, 'universal' human running bodies. To the Raratmuri, a 400-metre track proved anything but universal or standard. On the contrary, it was altogether foreign to their own habitual notion of ordinary terrain. The question, then, becomes, universal and standard for whom?

In his essay 'Running Through a Field', Greg Whelan eruditely (and humorously) traces the origins of the modern Olympic marathon back through the poetry of Robert Browning, the biographies of Plutarch and the histories of Herodotus to actual foot messengers of Greece and Rome who ran from city to city delivering important information to powerful people (2012: 115). These foot messengers were a kind of early, brute force form of communications media. As with the internet today, speed was of the essence. But the Barkley Marathons originates not in Greece or Rome, but in Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary. The goal of any prison break is not to be the fastest escapee ever, but simply to escape at all. You either escape, or you fail to escape. Speed is of course relevant, but the difference between a 58-hour escape and 60-hour escape is inconsequential, provided one finally escapes.

If you were to devise a race between New York City bicycle couriers to see which one was the best, the race would test their comparative speed, not whether they were able to deliver messages at all. But the Barkley is not such a race. It is not a challenge to see who will complete it the fastest. It is a challenge to see if anyone can complete it at all. The course is based on the inability of convicts to escape from an isolated prison. This makes for a completely different kind of race. Indeed, the full Barkley was not completed by anyone until 1995, a full nine years after the race began. It took six more years for the second person to complete the race (Mahoney 2018).

The awakening of the runners at an unknown hour prior to the start of the race is not an ordinary aspect of other footraces. But it is an intentional part of the Barkley, because it is relevant to (if not literally correlated with) the prison break history. The prisoners had to escape when the opportunity presented itself. They had to be ready. The prisoners had to make do in the woods as they were able. The runners may sleep at any point during the race, but they must complete each lap in at least twelve hours, or they are disqualified. The prisoners couldn't stay too long in any one place, or they risked capture. In all of these senses, the Barkley is meant to exceed the boundaries of an ordinary

footrace (even an ‘ultra-extreme’ one) based on the historical precedent of long-distance message couriers racing each other to see who is the fastest. Its challenge is derived from the contours of a historic event of escape and survival, not a historic event of media exchange. The Barkley is not meant to measure speed. It is meant to cause failure.

The Barkley’s race distance was not calibrated to be human-completable. It was based on an exaggerated boast, intended to be largely impossible. Granted, many runners in the Boston Marathon have as their goal simply to finish at all, but other runners are trying to beat their own personal records (PRs). Some are trying to finish in the top five of their age group. And an elite few runners are trying to win the entire race, and possibly break the course record. Whereas, in the Barkley Marathons, clock time, the great genericizer and translator of labour value that makes precise performance comparisons possible across hundreds of different road race marathons, is rendered much less relevant. How many loops did you finish this year? That is the relevant question.

Because the goal of the Barkley is to virtually ensure failure, its found constraints are able to be directly translated into the race without having to be conformed to the mould of a standard footrace in which at least some of the participants are expected to finish. The sawbriars do not have to be cleared, paths do not have to be indicated, ridiculously steep inclines do not have to be avoided, milestone books may be placed in the tops of trees, course instructions may remain intentionally vague, maps do not need to be created and distributed, start times do not need to be published, water may be provided in the form of ice if the weather so dictates.

Furthermore, since the paradigm of the race is one of escape from prison rather than escape from ‘the wilds of nature’ (as is the case with orienteering/wayfinding and survival skills challenges), man-made, site-specific elements may happily be incorporated into the course. No artificial ‘man vs nature’ dichotomies need be maintained or constructed. Rat Jaw, the horrendous climb/descent lined with 8-foot-high sawbriars, follows a row of power lines. The sawbriars grow so high and treacherous there

because trees have been cleared to make way for the power lines, so there is no shady overgrowth inhibiting the briars’ expansion. Elsewhere, the few hiking paths that are able to serve as wayfinding markers are maintained by human park workers employed by the state of Tennessee. And even off the trails, there is very little old growth forest left in the Appalachian Mountains since Europeans first arrived and began cutting trees down hundreds of years ago. At every turn, ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ are deeply entangled. Rather than pretend this is not so, the Barkley Marathons recognizes and exploits these nature–culture entanglements. The course doesn’t eschew the power lines, hiking paths or prison tunnels in order to seek out a more ‘pure’, ‘natural’ challenge. Indeed, these human–mountain entanglements are part of the original impetus for the race (a prison in the mountains) in the first place.

The model of ‘human runner’ meant to encounter all of these found constraints and historical entanglements is quite different from the model of ‘human runner’ meant to encounter a courier-paradigmed ultramarathon. The Barkley Marathons is constructed not merely to test the bodily strength of a human, or even the ‘mental toughness’ of a human. It is constructed to cause full-stop human failure, to cause a human to come to the end of themself. Most of the crucial mistakes made by Barkley runners are wayfinding and navigational errors, or simply mistakes of judgement, made due to sleep deprivation and

■ Rat Jaw. Photo Michael Doyle





extreme exhaustion. Yes, a sense of ‘mental toughness’ is required; but also a sense of humour, self-deprecation and an appreciation of the cosmic absurdity and virtual impossibility of the task you have undertaken, since you probably won’t even finish. According to Laz, ‘If you’re going to face a real challenge, it has to be a real challenge. You can’t accomplish anything without the possibility of failure’ (Iltis and Kane 2014).

#### TOWARDS MORE FAILURE IN ENDURANCE PERFORMANCE ART

As an endurance performance artist, my takeaway from the Barkley Marathons is that welcoming human failure into performance allows an event to be more site-specific and more open to influence and entanglement with extra-human forces at play in the world. If a traditional theatre performance must always at least succeed and be completed, it is perforce constrained to be closer to artifice and mimesis and farther away from situated actuality. Inviting failure into a performance invites the particular forces and traits of a site to engage with performing humans in ways that range from courteous to confrontational to overwhelming. Once failure is an option, this qualitative range of human–site encounters need not be bracketed in order to ensure performative human success. The entire performance event becomes less anthropocentric and more open to a range of engagements between human and site.

As a performance art case study in failure, I want to briefly compare Matthew Barney’s *Drawing Restraint* project with Chris Burden’s 1975 *Doomed* performance. For his *Drawing Restraint* series, Barney devised a number of human-constraining apparatuses that made drawing difficult for him. For example, one was a kind of elastic harness affixed to one side of the gallery. Once attached to the harness, Barney had to strain against it to reach the opposite wall of the gallery, onto which he drew. In another instance, Barney repeatedly bounced on a small trampoline in order to gradually draw on the ceiling.<sup>1</sup>

*Drawing Restraint* is ingenious in a number of ways. Market-wise, it is a performance that Barney can’t really sell, which nevertheless

results in drawings and sculptural objects (the restraints themselves) that Barney can sell. In terms of portability, *Drawing Restraint* can be reperformed in multiple galleries because the ‘art’ of the performance consists of Barney’s body, his constructed restraint systems, gravity and gallery walls. Barney has notably climbed in a rock climbing harness in both the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (which has a suspended interior bridge) and (for his *Cremaster* project) in the Manhattan Guggenheim (with its famous spiral interior walkway and open atrium). But *Drawing Restraint* does not *require* interior bridges or spiral walkways in order to function. It works just as well in generic white cube galleries. The sports equivalent of *Drawing Restraint* might be the 400-metre dash, a race that may be run just as well on any one of a thousand standard, 400-metre oval tracks around the world. Barney himself comes from the world of American football, so perhaps we should compare *Drawing Restraint* to a punt return across a standard-length football field. Either way, the site-agnostic analogy holds true.

*Drawing Restraint* does coquettishly court failure, but in a way that is always guaranteed to ultimately avoid it. However difficult and laborious, a drawing will always be drawn. The constraints of the performance are contrived in such a way that there is no actual chance of human failure. As such, Barney’s body is in dialogue with his own human-contrived restraint systems, and with gravity. It is a ‘standard’ athletic human body in an anthropocentric performance. There is nothing ethically or aesthetically wrong with this kind of performance or this kind of art. I personally love *Drawing Restraint*. But it is not Barkley-esque performance art. It doesn’t invite enough failure; and, as a result, it is less site-specific than it otherwise could be.

In contrast to Barney’s *Drawing Restraint*, Chris Burden’s 1975 *Doomed* performance *does* court actual failure. Burden devised a performance in which he would lie in the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art beneath a sheet of glass angled against the gallery wall next to a clock he had brought until someone from the gallery did something to either him, the glass or the clock. But no one from the gallery knew beforehand

<sup>1</sup> See [www.drawingrestraint.net](http://www.drawingrestraint.net)



that these were the rules of the performance. Eventually, after forty-five hours, fearing for Burden's health, the curator placed a pitcher of water next to him. At which point, Burden got up and smashed the clock with a hammer (Ebert 1975).

Burden's subsequent explanation of the performance hints at the ways in which *Doomed* both courts failure and invokes site-specificity:

I thought perhaps the piece would last several hours ... I thought maybe they'd come up and say, okay, Chris, it's 2 a.m. and everybody's gone home and the guards are on overtime and we have to close up. That would have ended the piece, and I would have broken the clock, recording the elapsed time. On the first night, when I realized they weren't going to stop the piece, I was pleased and impressed that they had placed the integrity of the piece ahead of the institutional requirements of the museum. On the second night, I thought, my God, don't they care anything at all about me? Are they going to leave me here to die? (Ebert 1975).

By ceding control of the duration of the piece to curators who were unaware of their own agency to control it, Burden risked the failure of death, or at least the failure of having to eventually break the rules of his own piece. By risking such failure, the piece invokes and brings into play the entire site-specific ensemble of that particular curatorial staff; that particular museum; the legal, ethical and aesthetic obligations of contemporary museum culture; the degree of commitment that contemporary museums have to new forms of experimental performance; and so on. 'Site-specific' need not mean 'non-human' or 'natural'. It simply means specific to a particular site, extending beyond the boundary of the invented constraints the artist has placed on the performance. The genius of Burden's performance is that he was able to 'find' all of these constraints within the ostensibly site-agnostic, white cube museum culture of the Chicago MoCA. Burden devised this particular performance because the curator (Ira Licht) was so insistent prior to the performance that Burden tell him the estimated length of the performance. *Doomed* empowered Licht himself to determine the duration of the performance. Because *Doomed* courts actual failure and invokes site-specific oppositional forces, it qualifies as Barkley-esque performance art.

Failure is so baked into the origins and constraints of the Barkley Marathons, it becomes the most probable outcome for all of the runners. The Barkley is a performance at the limit of performance. It suggests a model of endurance performance art where failure is not only possible but probable. Why might one choose to construct such (near) impossible performances? To encounter more of the rest of the world: a world that regularly exceeds the limits of, and is largely indifferent towards, our understanding of a 'standard' human body. In order to discover not simply what a body binarily can or can't do, but to explore what strange body-world entanglements might occur when our bodies rigorously fail to succeed: to (fail to) escape our own bodily incarcerations in new ways that might matter.

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