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How We Practice

What do we mean when we use the word *practice* today? What, for instance, do my students mean when they describe how the internet informs their *practice*? And is that different from the yoga teacher, who, while correcting a posture in a recent class, told me that my “*practice* seemed off”? As a practicing artist, writer and teacher, the more I sit with this seemingly self-evident piece of lexis the more disconcerted I become by our mutual, if conflicting and open-ended, usage of it. How can one word at once describe a process, the ideas behind that process, *and* the application of that process? Why has it become such common parlance in the world of visual art, and in applying it so broadly, what nuance are we possibly doing away with?

My aim is not to argue against the term-as-idea—to snuff out the word simply because it’s fashionable—but rather to make a case for the potential of practice through a more sensitive understanding of what it might offer artists. I’ve tried to explore these questions without over-abusing the word itself, though that too proves a (surprisingly demonstrative) challenge. I’ve gotten so used to slinging the term around that now I can’t think up any others in its place.

I’m not the first person to question the overuse and under-investigation of this word. In his 2014 review of the Whitney Biennial for *The New Yorker*, aptly titled “Get with It,”¹ Peter Schjeldahl wrote about a phenomenon he labeled as “The Age of Practices”:

The word “practice” pops up as a leitmotif throughout the show’s densely texted catalogue. We used to speak of what artists do as their art or their work or, tangentially, their style, vocation, discipline, allegiance, or passion. But now all is practice, with a sense of discrete, professional enterprise. In a way, the fashionable usage recalls the rage for academic critical theory that dominated highbrow art and art talk during the 1980s and ‘90s. A subsequent, general rejection of that brainy orientation remains tied to it as a shift of emphasis in the formula “theory and practice.” A practice presumably speaks for itself, in a community of practitioners, like those with nameplates in an office complex.

Schjeldahl brings up three critical points here, worth bearing out:

1. Practice has supplanted words like “discipline” or “style” because it reflects the art world’s desire to legitimize and professionalize. The word itself is sub-defined as a place of business. Who owns practices, after all, if not doctors, dentists, and lawyers?
2. Practice implies a community-bound enterprise, determined and defined by the characteristic of membership.

Carmen Winant (b. 1983, San Francisco) is a writer, artist, and Assistant Professor of Critical Studies at the Columbus College of Art and Design in Columbus, OH. Winant is a regular contributor to *Frieze* magazine, *The Believer* and *Aperture* Magazines, *X-TRA*, and *Art Papers*. She is an editor at *WAX* Magazine and the co-editor of *The Highlights* Journal.

3. Practice refers to an evolving theoretical turn in art, art criticism, and—though Schjeldahl doesn't directly say it—MFA programs that now offer terminal degrees in some form of practice (social, critical, or otherwise).

It's hard not to agree with Schjeldahl on each front: that practice is in fashion because it holds inside of it communal, cerebral, and expert tendencies—and that words like “vocation,” “passion,” and even “production” feel dated and one-dimensional in comparison. This is an astute analysis, one of the few I've read, but it only goes so far as to unpack the word in relation to, and in association with, culture (corporate, cooperative, institutional, etc.). In a short 2007 *New York Times* essay titled “What We Talk About When We Talk About Art,”² Roberta Smith made a similar case with similar terms, arguing that the word practice, which intimates the need for a license or permission to make work, “turns the artist into an utterly conventional authority figure.” Like Schjeldahl, Smith resents the word not only as a vestige of vocabulary specific to MFA programs, but also as a reflection of those programs' professional function: artists now feel they must receive a terminal certificate to produce seriously. In the minds of these leading critics—both of whom have been around long before this word came into style—neither the term practice nor its broader professional implications leave sufficient space for the experimentation that is the real work of the artist.

I'm struck at once by how accurate and how limited this understanding is. Schjeldahl and Smith approach practice from a singular and somewhat rigid point of view—the

professional group operating within a privatized market and/or academic framework—and overlook other possible readings or implications of the word and its possible ideation.

My first encounters with practice, as a ritual and a site, were miles away from the art world. For a decade, I was a competitive distance runner and practice, once again, had twin meanings: it was both *where I went*—from, say, 6:30 am to 10:00 am, and then again at 5:00 pm—as well as *the thing I did* once I got there. At the time, I didn't know the word tautology, but if I did, I would have used it to describe the linguistic shortcoming of going to practice to practice. My athletic life drew to a close as I neared the end of college and, longing to move away from a world-as-body and into a world-as-mind, I could not imagine a single point of overlap between the two, and went so far as to hide my jock identity from my newfound artistic friends. I changed out of my running clothes in public bathrooms stalls after practice to avoid any conversation around, or acknowledgement of, my other life. I was still too ignorant to consider the potential that one world lent to the other. I'd ventured into visual art in part because it seemed irreconcilable with running. Practice followed me persistently, unwittingly, from one life to another. How could the same word apply to such different sites of action?

As with any festering conflict, this one eventually, recalcitrantly, bore fruit. Though I dodged it for years, my training as a runner eventually opened up broader possibilities into what I had compartmentalized as my “creative” life. I don't mean to imply that I began making art that pictured athleticism (though I did do that for a while and it was pretty terrible), but I began considering how the terms of practice for the athlete's

1. Peter Schjeldahl, “Get With It.” *The New Yorker* 17 March 2014.

2. Roberta Smith, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Art.” *The New York Times* 23 December 2007. Online.

body could provide some insight for every artist's body.

In order to do this, I needed to circumnavigate problems like legitimacy, license, and ultimately, salary—naturally put forward by professional critics—as well as the idea that both art and sports are generally competitive and require a lot of “hard work.” See Philip Glass's recent interview on *Fresh Air*,³ in which Glass likens a musician's capacity for self-discipline to the training ethic of athletes. Or refer to the essay “Athletic Aesthetics”⁴ by Brad Troemel in *The New Inquiry*, in which the drive to create a singular artist brand online is compared to a sportsman-like competitiveness. Like every football, tennis, swimming, boxing, basketball, or running movie ever made, these treatises are not untrue, just facile. They flatten all athletic experience into the training montage and the championship match while disregarding that its veritable reality is comprised of hundreds if not thousands of private hours spent repeating grueling tests to build strength, skillfulness, and endurance. By approaching athletic life as a blanket metaphor rather than a lived experience, we oversimplify a timeless ritual of repetition. We miss an opportunity to consider the stakes of practice as a generative and ongoing engagement with failure, perpetrated as infinite rehearsal.

The best case study for this can be found—where else?—with the young Matthew Barney, who coined the phrase “the Artist is the Athlete,” and who, alone in the Yale gymnasium basement in the late 1980s, created the first six *Drawing Restraint* experiments. (Barney was, not coincidentally, a former football star in his Idaho hometown, and, depending on whom you ask, was either too short or had too weak an arm to play college ball.) In these early and solitary

experiments, Barney strapped himself into home-fashioned restraints and reached against them and toward a far wall with drawing utensils in hand. In other cases he held a long pen and jumped on a small trampoline while reaching for the ceiling. Though only one of these early *Restraints* makes direct reference to sport (in *Drawing Restraint 3* Barney tried to clean and jerk a bar made from frozen petroleum wax and jelly), they all tapped a familiar muscle memory for the young former quarterback.

These blunt experiments—and they were crucially “experiments,” never “performances”—mimicked and enacted the terms of practice for the athlete. Though the subsequent *Drawing Restraints* would become slicker and more refined, it was these early, messy experiments that did the real work. I recognize every single one as an engagement with untold repetition, exhaustion, stamina, anxiety, futility, masochism (however tame), and most of all, the real beating heart of practice: failure.

I'm not just talking about the narrative failure here—of Barney's inability to continue with his football career—but meta-failures, teased out as meaningful strategy and content. First, failure in its most literal sense: Barney's foundering body, reaching desperately over and over for a wall it couldn't quite touch. Second, failure as internalized and physiological: what we call soreness after physical exertion is actually a breakdown of muscles, or an inability of the body to withstand strain. Barney labels this process “entropy,” or sometimes the more medicalized “hypertrophy” in his writings; it is the process of small fissures—called “micro-tears” by exercise physiologists—created in our hamstrings, biceps, or pectorals, to be “patched” by nascent muscle. Barney refers to this process in a

3. Glass, Phillip. “On Legacy: ‘The Future...It's All Around Us.’” *Fresh Air with Terry Gross*. NPR, 6 April 2015. Radio.

4. Troemel, Brad. “Athletic Aesthetics.” *The New Inquiry* 10 May 2013. Online.



2006 video produced by SFMoMA, saying, “I think that as an athlete you understand that your body requires resistance in order to grow. The whole training process is built upon that understanding.”⁵ Consider this as a model for generative catastrophe: body builders working to create as many internal tears as possible.

These early *Drawing Restraint* experiments—so rife with practice—manifest and describe failure itself. In athletic terms, and arguably creative ones, the subject is, by design, met face-to-face with his or her own inadequacies, not as a byproduct of practice but as its endpoint. Practice teases out faults and weaknesses in an attempt to patch, to strengthen, to move toward but never quite reach one’s own impossible “potential.” The etymology of the word refers to being fit for action but never engendering the action itself. Practice, then, is the perennial state of being almost-there, the great anti-climax. The artist—forever making, searching, rehearsing, and confronting impossible and often laborious problems—belongs this same country.

We need a word like practice. To dismiss it offhand as being

synonymous with “work” or “professionalism” is a mistake. The more critics bemoan the term as making sole reference to the institutionalization of art, or the overvaluation of credentials (as William Deresiewicz declared in his recent article for the *Atlantic*⁶), the less space they afford for its multivalent promises. I’ve been turning to artists themselves to do this work, to demonstrate and engage the conditions of athletic life (Francis Alÿs, Mark Bradford, and Yoko Ono are supreme at this), to remind me of just how meaningful a connection can be made.

Not every artist needs their practice to produce content. Their explorations, like Barney’s, make simply plain how practice can function as both productive failure and rehearsal for active, extended bodies. More than any other discursive arguments about the term, the early *Drawing Restraint* works lay bare this kinship between athletic practice and creative practice distinct from a conversation around professionalization and remuneration. Creative and athletic inquests are not so far removed after all. If only I’d known earlier.

5. Barney, Matthew. “The Origins of Drawing Restraint.” SFMOMA.org. June 2006. Online.

6. Deresiewicz, William. “The Death of the Artist—and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur.” *The Atlantic* January/February 2015. Print.