

PRACTICING - Art practice as eco system questionnaire by Chrysa Parkinson

<https://vimeo.com/26763244>

What are you working on?

I'm trying to understand practices, particularly the practices of performing artists. I'm working in Montpellier at 6M1L/E.x.erce. And I'm touring, with Zoo/Thomas Hauert and occasionally with Deborah Hay. And I'm teaching. When I'm not performing, I do a daily performance practice based on a combination of scores from Deborah and Zoo and other people. It has about six sections. Sometimes I help people devise daily performance practices (aka Personal Performance Practice, or PPP). Sometimes I just talk to people about how they hierarchize information and sustain themselves creatively. Sometimes I take part of someone's practice and add it to my own.

That sounds like a lot of things.

It's all the same thing kind of. It just happens in a lot of different places.

Can you define what you mean by practice more clearly?

I'm trying to do that. I'm not satisfied yet. I started with the idea that there's something I do that is not training, process, or product, and that this thing is what underlies the decisions I make about training, process and product. And I wanted to call that thing my practice – but I didn't have a way of saying that in one phrase – a slogan. Then I thought maybe I could say the underlying, overarching thing I do is “giving and getting attention.” Then more recently I thought maybe my practice is just performance.

Why do you need the slogan?

I don't really. But it's useful for demystification.

Seems like you would have to be careful that the wording doesn't hijack the concept.

Yes. That's the whole point, actually. I want to identify this concept of practice more precisely because I can feel that not only are my training, process and product changing, but also my way of choosing them is changing. In order to be clear and responsible, conscious, generous, effective, etcetera, I need to take a look at how I'm making decisions, and why.

So a practice is like a structure.

A volatile one. The most important thing to me about identifying my practice is noticing it change, letting it change.

Does this interest come up because of teaching people?

Yes. I notice my students devising principles, or thought-maps, mythologies, wish-lists, moral codes... some substructure that helps them navigate or synthesize or do some other thing that I don't know exactly what it is; that thing helps them get through and around and up on their work. A lot of students start from a very vulnerable, vague point. Then they go make lives based on making art. It's remarkable.

But isn't that just that they get training and then become good enough at what they want to do to actually do it?

No. They often redefine being "good at it" by redefining "it." That's the excitement. They use their education to change the field they work in.

Not everyone.

No. But even the ones who fit into an existing set of standards arrive at that level of achievement through something more than just training. Taking class every day isn't enough. You have to have a way of processing information that works. And I see it in the other, older artists I work with too.

But is that the actual definition of practice? The "thing you do that isn't training, process or product but underlies your choices in training, process and product"?

I used that definition to start with because I could feel it in myself, and I observed it at work in other people.

I know Deborah uses the concept of practice, but who else does?

Actually I hear it used a lot lately.

Me too, but I think people mean different things by it.

Yes. It gets soupy.

What do people mean, actually? I'm getting more confused now than I was before people used the word so much.

I think I hear performing artists and educators use the word three ways, basically. There's practice as "an active thought". Meaning that if my practice is music, I apply the concepts and experience of musicality to analyze and intuit all my experiences. And if my practice is performance, I use the concepts and experience of performance to analyze and intuit my experiences.

So that would mean if I'm studying dance but my practice is music, I use the concepts and experience of music to analyze and intuit the dance information I'm exposed to?

Yes. And you see a lot of people approaching dance through a musical practice. In fact, dance can often be found humping the leg of other art forms.

Why are you so derogatory about that?

It's another topic, but it's one of the basic problems in thinking about dance. In order for dance to be taken seriously, it's often used to create metaphors for psychology, theory, music, visual art, etc.

You would exclude other art forms?

No. I'd just like to do more dancing. More things based on movement.

Movement is a poetic concept as well as an actual thing.

Let's talk about this later. Actually you should really talk to Tere O'Connor about this. He's very articulate on the subject, which is rare. It's hard to talk about it.

Okay. So what's another way you hear people using the word practice?

The other thing people mean by the word practice is "an habitual or regular activity". If I'm a practicing musician, I play an instrument regularly. If I'm a practicing performer, I perform often. It often means that the person is a professional in that field, but not necessarily.

And in that case if I'm a musician and studying dance, I could use this definition "habitual or regular activity" and say that I am practicing dance?

If you were a snake charmer and you regularly work as a dentist, you could say you were practicing dentistry.

That's confusing.

There's more. Americans spell the noun and the verb the same way, "a practice" and "to practice." In the British spelling, the verb develops an s. I have a dentistry practice. I'm going to my office to practise dentistry. I have a dance practice. I'm practising dance.

That's irrelevant.

Not really. They mean different things, and they're spelled differently. Actually I think I'll switch to the British spelling now. The third way I hear it used – to "try" – means if I go to the studio to practise my music, I go play my instrument repetitively, or rehearse. If I go to the studio and

practise a dance, I rehearse. If I'm a student practising dances, it means I keep doing movements until I get them right.

You can't practice British spelling.

No, you have to practise British spelling.

But you can have a British spelling practice.

Exactly.

Thanks, that clears things up.

You're welcome.

The first definition you used for practice, "an active thought" sounds like the definition of praxis "the process by which a theory, lesson or skill is enacted." Is practice and praxis the same thing?

Maybe. A practice is an active thought, while praxis is an action that enables that thought. I wish the words sounded more different. It's confusing and that there are so many words that start with P. Makes me feel ridiculous.

That's ridiculous. Stop talking about that. Do you want to not use the word "praxis?"

It exists and I hear it around. Maybe it's useful.

It does seem like a pretty tangible difference -- "an active thought," or "an action that enables thought." Seems concrete enough to be relevant.

The problem is, I think, that so many thoughts and actions I'm interested in can't be identified as one or the other.

What do you mean? Is that some Buddhist thing?

You know I'm not a Buddhist. If there's a relationship it's accidental.

But you meditate.

That's personal.

But it's a practice.

Okay. But I really would prefer to keep that out of this discussion because I'm not sure how to talk

about it. I can feel the concrete effects of meditation on how I concentrate, and on the detailing of my sensations, but I think there are spiritual connotations to doing it that I have not dealt with at all and don't know how to deal with, and I don't want to deal with it with you. So I feel unqualified to speak about it right now.

All right, all right. Relax. I'm sorry I brought it up. So. What do you mean by a thought-action? And what does it have to do with praxis/practice?

So. I often experience both actions and ideas as scores; a movement or performance idea, like an action, can take an amount of time, or can occupy a place. But ideas are also processes. Actions are definitely processes. Scores are durational places. You spend time in a score.

How can idea be a place?

Any idea I can "get in to" is a place. Any idea I can embody.

Can you give an example?

Okay. With apologies to the people that I'm paraphrasing, plagiarizing, misrepresenting.... For example, David Zambrano's idea/score/practice/action of "passing through" creates an area of experience that is clearly enough defined to distinguish it as a place. I can drop in there. Sometimes I use the idea of "fiction". If I superimpose the idea of fiction on my actions, they are contained and limited by that definition – I can't get out of the idea until I drop it. Or Deborah Hay's questions that start with "what if every cell in my body could...". Or the way Thomas Hauert conceptualizes the relationships between force and space and bodies (I can't find a simpler way to say that yet...). Working with him I can feel the pressure and release, the momentum and force and launching effects of his experience of connection. His way of connecting manifests itself both physically and intellectually. It's not an absolute Truth; it's a perception that finds ways to act itself out.

And Martin Kilvady's concept of "dancing" as a field of experience?

Exactly. If you say what you're doing is dancing, then you change the definition of dancing. The idea becomes a container that shapes whatever action takes place there, and the actions that take place there also re-shape the container. Jonathan Burrows has a sense of proportion – I've heard him call it "human scale" that runs through all his work. The idea acts on him. He acts on the idea. It's integrating, but there are things I think he wouldn't do because of this practice/idea/score/action of finding a human scale.

Maybe the concepts of praxis and practice are continuous, like a mobius strip. “My practice is contained by a praxis but the praxis is also defined by my practice?”

Yes. I’m not sure what the good of distinguishing these words is. The more I think about it the more dangerous it seems to me.

Why?

Practice becomes static if you separate it from Praxis, and vice versa.

What’s wrong with that?

Once a practice is static it’s no longer functional. It becomes a marketable object, a product. Practices have to remain volatile, unstable enough to change.

I don’t understand how volatility makes something unmarketable. And I don’t understand what’s wrong with marketability.

I’m a performing artist. I change – I get old, I fall in love, I move to another city, I get injured, I develop skills, I develop knowledge, I lose interest, I get seduced, etc. In order to guide me through training, process and product, my practice has to change.

If you can conceive of a product with no author or owner, you could think of a practice as a chemical reaction that would act as a catalyst on your experience.

Yes. And then why would you bother buying it. It’s not going to keep the value or shape it has in someone else’s experience. And anyway it’s just there. Just take it.

But David sells Passing Through, doesn’t he?

No. I don’t think that’s what he’s doing. He teaches ways of moving, techniques that he’s discovered for passing through. It’s a way to start. He’s not selling the practice of passing through, and certainly not the practice in the way that he uses it for himself. He lives that. He invites people to join him in that way of living. He’s often providing people with space or time. They spend it with him and they learn from him, but he’s not bartering.

Is there really a difference?

Yes. Klein Technique tried to become a product at one point. A select group of people went into an intensive studying relationship with the authors of that technique, but when it came down to it, every one of that group of people declined their diploma. They felt that the elitism of qualification, and the labeling of the product as intellectual property, was detrimental to the practice. I think it’s a

testament to the ideas behind that practice that it's practitioners refused to make a product out of it.

I remember that. It was shocking.

Yes, and exciting. It depends on the teacher, of course, but techniques become hard-wired, systematized, standardized. You can recognize the correct application of this technique in a process. You can see how the training and process have culminated in the product and you can anticipate the market they'll reach. It's boring. It's not live.

But aren't training, process and product part of your practice?

Sometimes some of them have been. There are periods where I'm involved in processes that are not integrated into my practice, or I'm performing pieces that don't fit into my principles, or I'm training myself for things that are no longer relevant to me. Out of habit. When I realize that's going on I have to adapt my practice to include them, or I have to stop doing them.

For students that happens with training.

Yes. They have to study some method that is outside their experience, their principles, their expectations. For example, I'm not really that athletic. I don't tend to push myself aerobically or muscularly. My preference is for subtler physicalities, but I perform some pieces demand a higher level of effort, and I like that intensity as a principle. I like the principle of physical range – and I like the principle of challenging my desires. So in my daily practice I've included a kind of jumping that uses that area of physicality that I wouldn't go to usually.

And does that practice have to be daily?

No. It depends. Sometimes day-to-day consistency helps to heighten your experience of the physical relationships between actions and ideas. Body time is different. For things like stamina you need a daily rhythm, obviously.

What's the difference between daily training and daily practice?

Training is about learning and improving on specific tasks. Deborah, for example, calls practice "learning without trying." If you're training, you're trying to learn. You're goal oriented, or maybe you're putting yourself in that student-teacher relationship to find some objectivity. A practice, for the most part, is independent of teachers, and intensely subjective. It doesn't need the presence of a viewer, although it doesn't exclude it either. I don't think you can specify the goals of a practice the way you can those of training.

But you're training for stamina in your daily practice.

Not really. I could train for stamina by running much more efficiently. Stamina is a welcome by-product. I'm looking for the dancing when I jump rope.

No doubt. But some people use training as a part of their practice.

Yes. That relationship with a teacher, or even just with a goal, can function to help you keep interested in your work life. I have definitely felt that way at certain times – like I needed help to change my patterns so I could do more things. I was getting injured. Training can help with boredom. When I complain my friend Greg says, “use your training.”

And what's the difference between process and practise?

Process also has a specific goal. If you don't create a product from a process, it's a failed process. It's also a question of duration. Most processes are finished once the piece is constructed. A practice can span many processes. But I definitely use things I've learned in processes in my daily practice.

You said you take other people's practices.

Yes, I realized in working on it that because my practice is performance, I have to do the thing to understand it. It's tricky because I have to learn to listen and watch people without absorbing their experience too quickly into my own if I want to learn something new. But I can't learn new things without doing them.

You're just always stealing then?

No. It's actually rare that I really like what someone else does enough to adopt it as part of my own thought process. I do relatively little of what I've learned.

It seems like you've adopted Deborah Hay's practice.

Yes and no. I'm very influenced by her. She's the first person I'd ever heard speak about (and use) performance itself as a practice. So when I talk about performance and practice, I use her language a lot. It's clear. But I take a lot from Thomas/Zoo, and it's difficult to find the right language for what we're doing in that group. Maybe “looking at movement for what it expresses itself, not it's metaphoric potential.” I learned that as a theory from Tere O'Connor, but as a practice from working with Thomas. It runs through everything I do now.

Are you defensive about being so influenced by Deborah?

Probably a little. Sometimes I feel like what I do is Deborah-Lite. Anyway. It's a place to start. I try

to say her name a lot so people will have her name in their heads.

What have you taken from the people in Montpellier?

I took things for my daily practice. I'm not sure how they'll fit into the larger picture. I took jumping rope from Jefta. It works well as a form of "bounce" which is an adaptation of "moving through space without traveling from here to there," which relates to Passing Through, but also to Zoo's work with space, and is a direct adaptation of a Deborah Hay score. I took loops from Mette. I use them in one part of my body as part of a 3in One score I do. From Bojana I think I'm learning and maybe practicing "thinking in conversation." I'm not sure I do that yet, actually, but I'm very attracted to it. It has to do with speech and performance and improvising and thinking and writing. I'm not sure how it will manifest eventually.

If you think of the material of performance as perception, or as relationship (as Deborah would say), then some form of "doing it" to understand it makes sense.

Yes. That's why I like to think of the daily practices, the PPPs, as small, condensed metaphoric versions of your larger practice. They are microclimates in the larger environment of your ecosystem. You can experiment safely there. I really learned that from Deborah. That's how she makes pieces, developing them out of her daily performance practice. I do take a lot from Deborah. I feel like the "learning without trying" happened in this interview, for example.

Oh. I just thought of something. Maybe the difference that's actually important is the difference between "a practice" and "my practice." Once something becomes your practice, it's infinitely more complicated than it was when it was something you could pick up from someone else. It becomes implicated in all your work, all aspects of training, process and product, and if you tried to separate it out you would kill it, or kill a part of yourself.

That's a bit dramatic. Drowning your inner kitten. But maybe it's that simple also.

Yes, and it's funny because I've been noticing that writing is a way of making sense, which is what performance does for me.

And "thinking in conversation..."?

Not yet. I'm just attracted to it. I can't quite do it...

More training.

Bojana calls the attention that passes between an audience and a performance “synchronizing with the duration of what you’re watching.”

Yes. I like that. Writing can synchronize. Writing can be a performance practice.

Then performance could still be your practice, even if you never performed.

Is that a goal?

No. I don’t know. Maybe. Is it for you?

I think it might be for me actually.

Oh, okay. Good luck.

Thanks.

REFLECTING on Practice by Chrysa Parkinson

The art practice as eco-system questionnaire is designed to provide a sense-based guide for identifying your current art practice – it is a document of a specific time. This questionnaire can be done repeatedly in order to notice changes in how you use your senses and changes in how you relate to your environment. These changes, in combination with your attention to your current situation can act as a guide for creating (and evolving) an art practice that precisely embodies your interests.

In this questionnaire when I ask about senses I mean any kind of sense, including sense of justice, proportion, humor, smell, vision, taste, history, hearing, language, kinesthesia, proprioception or any other thing you think you have a sense for. Having a sense for something means that you perceive it, either subtly or intensely.

By “by-products” I mean the things that happen because of work, but are not your first intention. For example: travel is a by-product for me. I only travel because of work. If it weren't for work I would stay home.

Some guidelines: Answer the questionnaire in relation to your immediate situation. Answer subjectively and precisely. If you don't understand a question, answer what you think it means.

- 1) What senses do you use the most?
- 2) Which senses guide you the most reliably towards your actual interests?
- 3) Which senses are unreliable, or lead you into unsustainable activities?
- 4) How do you refine or develop your senses?
- 5) What are the by-products of your work?
- 6) What by-products do you think are garbage, or toxic, or wasted?
- 7) What do you salvage and re-use in your work?
- 8) How does your work environment relate to the environment you live in? Does it depend on, challenge, survive despite, steal from, or symbiotically support the political, social, and/or physical environment you live in?
- 9) Describe the environment your senses create?
- 10) Describe what imagined from the senses you use would make of you (how you would look if your senses were to determine your form...)
- 11) What senses would you like to develop?