

# Dewey for Artists

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### 3 Practice

When living is a practice, life is an ever-evolving work of art. Historically, artists had a medium, a subject, and a style. Currently, many artists speak of having a *practice*. I welcome that term. Doctors and lawyers refer to their work as a practice, indicating the totality and credibility of what they do. Artists are often deemed (and demeaned) as free and inspired yet reckless spirits, not regarded as equals to the professional class in their craft. The combined term *art practice* verifies their training and the seriousness of their enterprise. Like *style*, *practice* is also a verb, yet it conveys a deeper way of making. We practice to get better at something, to perfect what we do. It is not a technique we get right and then repeat by habit; rather, as Dewey advocated, we are consciously present, so that each instance is lived anew. Over time we develop and change, which the philosopher saw as a necessary way of being in a constantly changing environment. Thus, as life unfolds, we remain in a continual state of becoming.

Artists and curators, in fact all of us, not only need *to practice*, but to cultivate *a practice* over a lifetime. To Dewey, to have a practice also gives form to our beliefs and, as we embody them, communicates our values to others as we put them into practice. So as a life path for artists, or anyone doing what they do as an art, practice goes to the core of their being.

A practice is not synonymous with a profession; it is more than that. We sense this in the question of architect Toyo Ito, as he struggled to address Japan's devastation wrought by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami: "I instinctively felt that I had to contemplate the essential question of 'What is architecture?' all over again."<sup>1</sup> Now Ito knows what architecture is and how to make it, yet in the Kamaishi revival project he was not operating as the principal of his Tokyo-based architectural practice. This situation, where nearly everything was leveled and so many died, demanded that he work differently, so he joined a five-member architectural team. But even more so, he found he had to access the very root of his practice, to live it in a reinvigorated way, abandoning master planning and working directly with residents to enable them to imagine their future. He wrote of this experience: "Pursuing architecture in this way—in its purest form, which is from the heart—was an amazing thing and made me feel as if I would require no more training for my future career."<sup>2</sup>

No more master plans. This organic approach recalls the permeable processes of the *Places with a Future* team—with Kendra Hamilton, Walter Hood, and Ernesto Pujol—that led to the revelation of lifeways in the Phillips Community. There, rather than implementing a plan, we chose to embody a deep listening process through which the values of the community could rise and, being heard, could be traced in the landscape. Later, Hood would call it a "speculative practice." This dynamic, emergent way of working, indebted to artists' practices to which Hood became exposed, was different from the professional practices of architecture and landscape design that he knew in which the outcome must be predefined. Speculative practice allows for uniquely appropriate answers to evolve that respect how people live in a place, their relationships to the environment, and their cultural histories. But one has to trust the process, and it must be lived as Pujol described: "To be thinking-making at all times, not a job-related making but an uninterrupted critical creative state, so that we walk through society in and with this state of non-art making, looking at life. Making brings us back to the senses, sensations, and experiences. To be in a state of practice, being

outside the studio, generates more experiences. It is a practice state.”<sup>3</sup> Dewey recognized that when making happens in this way and we trust the process, knowledge expands in unexpected, fruitful ways.

## Dewey's Practice

Dewey had an embodied practice. From his late fifties to early eighties, he trained with master practitioner Frederick Matthias Alexander in a mode of conscious control designed to promote awareness of posture and breathing. Dewey credited the Alexander Technique for his improved health and longevity, but it was more than a device to relieve the aging philosopher's aches and pains. It impacted his ideas and played a role in his writing from 1916 onward.<sup>4</sup> Yet to really understand what this practice meant, he said, one has to enact it. “I don't talk about it very much because unless one has had personal experience, it sounds to others just like another one of those enthusiasms for some pet panacea.”<sup>5</sup>

The challenge lay, as Dewey saw it, in that we become immune to the very things closest to us, including the capabilities we possess. We need to redirect dulling habits and undergo a “reeducation” of perception. Recognizing that this eludes common conception, we need a “concrete procedure,” and “this indispensable thing is exactly what Mr. Alexander has accomplished.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, practice was socially imperative:

Clearly we have not carried the plane of conscious control, the direction of action by perception of connections, far enough. We cannot separate organic life and mind from physical nature without also separating nature from life and mind. The separation has reached a point where intelligent persons are asking whether the end is to be a catastrophe, the subjection of man to the industrial and military machines he has created. This situation confers peculiar poignancy upon the fact that just where connections and interdependencies are most numerous, intimate and pervasive, in living, psycho-physical activity, we most ignore unity and connection, and trust most unreservedly in our deliberate beliefs to the isolated and specific — which signifies that in

action we commit ourselves to the unconscious and subconscious, to blind instinct and impulse and routine, disguised and rationalized by all sorts of honorific titles. Thus we are brought to the topic of consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

But if individuals acted in an integrated way, in accordance with the natural functions of the human organism, society itself would function better. For this, we must understand the continuity of mind and body—and that was just what Alexander’s method demonstrated. Dewey went to great lengths to verify that his claim was tested and scientific. Impassioned, he pleaded his case to the New York Academy of Medicine in 1928, saying that division is “so deep-seated that it has affected even our language. We have no word by which to name mind-body in a unified wholeness of operation. . . . Consequently, when we discuss the matter, when we talk of the relations of mind *and* body and endeavor to establish their unity in human conduct, we still speak of body *and* mind, unconsciously perpetuating the very division we are striving to deny. . . . What the facts testify to is not an influence exercised across and between two separate things, but to behavior so integrated that it is artificial to split it up into two things.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet to practice mind-body unity was challenging. Dewey shared, “I had the most humiliating experience of my life, intellectually speaking,” as he began to learn the Alexander Technique and was unable to follow directions to do “such a seemingly simple act as to sit down.” He had to develop a practice. Finding insufficient “all the mental capacity which one prides [oneself] upon possessing,” Dewey found this “not an experience congenial to one’s vanity.”<sup>9</sup> Instead he had to let go and learn to trust the process. And he looked to historical precedents, citing for instance Confucianism:

. . . the idea of non-doing can hardly be stated and explained; it can only be felt. It is something more than mere inactivity; it is a kind of rule of moral doing, a doctrine of active patience, endurance, persistence while nature has time to do her work. Conquering by yielding is its motto. . . . The Chinese philosophy of life embodies a profoundly

valuable contribution to human culture and one of which a hurried, impatient, over-busied and anxious West is infinitely in need.<sup>10</sup>

When visiting Japan in 1919, Dewey also found living evidence in the art of judo. He wrote home to his daughters:

. . . I think it is much better than most of our inside formal gymnastics. The mental element is much stronger. In short, I think a study ought to be made here from the standpoint of conscious control. Tell Mr. Alexander to get a book by Harrison — compatriot of his — out of the library, called “The Fighting Spirit of Japan.” It is a journalist’s book, not meant to be deep, but is interesting and said to be reliable as far as it goes. I noticed at the Judo the small waists of those people; they breathe always from the abdomen . . . I have yet to see a Japanese throw his head back when he rises.<sup>11</sup>

This was a body error that the Alexander Technique sought to correct, that is, we lead with our heads, hence strain our necks when we get up.

## Art Practice

Dewey had another life practice and that was looking at art. To practice the arts of living, as he called them, is “a matter of communication and participation in values of life by means of the imagination, and works of art are the most intimate and energetic means of aiding individuals to share in the arts of living.”<sup>12</sup> Art aids us in the practice of life, as we develop the habit of fully breathing in experience, making meaning that is integral to our sense of being; then, breathing it out as we act more consciously in the world, with an understanding of the consequences of our actions in relation to others and to the planet.

The poetry of the everyday, what Dewey saw as aesthetic experience in a life lived artfully, can be cultivated and put into practice through our experiences with works of art. “When the liberating of human capacity operates as a socially creative force,” the philosopher wrote, “art will not be a luxury, a stranger to the daily occupations of making a living.

Making a living economically speaking, will be at one with making a life that is worth living.”<sup>13</sup> Although the function of art eluded his contemporaries, Dewey staunchly believed that experiencing works of art had a useful role in the living of life. Thus, he wrote in 1925:

The present confusion, deemed chaos by some, in the fine arts and esthetic criticism seems to be an inevitable consequence of the underlying, even if unavowed, separation of the instrumental and the consummatory. . . . For these critics, in proclaiming that esthetic qualities in works of fine art are unique, in asserting their separation from not only every thing that is existential in nature but also from all other forms of good, in proclaiming that such arts as music, poetry, painting have characters unshared with any natural things whatsoever: — in asserting such things the critics carry to its conclusion the isolation of fine art from the useful, of the final from efficacious. They thus prove that the separation of the consummation from the instrumental makes art wholly esoteric.<sup>14</sup>

Dewey found allies among modern artists. The year after he published *Art as Experience*, artist-educator Josef Albers echoed the depth of Dewey’s concept of pursuing *an* experience of life as art, writing: “artistic seeing and artistic living are a deeper seeing and living.” He added that at Black Mountain College, where he was in residence at that time, they seek students who see “that real art is essential life and essential life is art.”<sup>15</sup> At the suggestion of the college’s rector, John Andrew Rice, Albers titled his article “Art as Experience.” Dewey’s ideas had already greatly influenced Rice in founding this educational experiment — a pedagogical testing ground for the unity of mind and body, where art and life were one. One Black Mountain student, Robert Rauschenberg, later famously spoke of acting in the gap between art and life,<sup>16</sup> yet for Dewey, there is no gap when we live life as a conscious experience.

Wolfgang Laib is an artist who lives his life as art. He studied medicine but never went into medical practice, instead cultivating a conscious way of making art and being in the world. His art practice is one with his life practice. Laib offers that to others, too, as he seeks to create



Wolfgang Laib. *Mahayagna*, 2009. Forty-five Brahmin priests officiate the fire ritual at the Fondazione Merz, Turin, Italy. Photo: Claudio Cravero, courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.

a living art, perpetuating a “sense of life . . . to keep something alive” and engaging the viewer directly.<sup>17</sup> Take his 2009 project at the Merz Foundation in Turin, Italy. It began as an intensely focused conversation with Brahmins in Tamil Nadu, the state in southern India where he and his wife Carolyn spend part of each year; his intention was to keep alive the work of Mario Merz, an artist with whom he had a close relationship. As Carolyn further elucidates the resulting project, “it was for us like a mutual act of prayer. Being a little bit shy of that word, it was a gesture different kinds of people were making at the same moment, so that the energy of all beings in that space in that time were relevant to what was happening. In that sense, it had its own life beyond our preparations, beyond what the Brahmins were trying to achieve. . . . Everything that happened had to do with all the living energy that was found at that moment. . . . It was to create a life-giving moment.”

For his father’s eightieth birthday, the artist drew upon the Tamil Nadu custom of visualizing the number of full moons since one’s birth, placing 1,008 rice mountains in the open space of the sparsely furnished home they share in southern Germany. “So often we think of being eighty, as ‘I’m getting old, approaching death,’” Carolyn said, “but it was the opposite. There was a richness shared by everybody.” This is the life-giving force that Dewey sought to convey when he spoke of the vitalizing effect of aesthetic experience.

Wolfgang often says that “the difference between yellow pigment and pollen is the whole story of life,” Carolyn further shares. “You have to be one with the work—look at it, smell it, think about it. You have to receive it; you have to be receptive to the life energy in an object. If you do that repeatedly over long periods of time, if that is your practice, it becomes an acute kind of existence or a state of mind that you learn.”<sup>18</sup> In Dewey’s understanding of living life as an art practice, aesthetic experiences do not just have a liveliness, they have an energetic sense of aliveness. That is what Wolfgang Laib manifests through the care he puts into making and what Katie Paterson imagines in the forest.

## Process as Practice

In his day, Dewey bemoaned that the creative aspect of attaining happiness was being flattened into something that could be purchased, a pleasure commodity:

Such a point of view treats concrete activities and specific interests not as worth while [*sic*] in themselves, or as constituents of happiness, but as mere external means to getting pleasures. . . . [Then] art, poetry, religion and the state [became] mere servile means of attaining sensuous enjoyments. Since pleasure was an outcome, a result valuable on its own account independently of the active processes that went into it, happiness was a thing to be possessed and held onto. The acquisitive instincts of man were exaggerated at the expense of the creative. Production was of importance not because of the intrinsic worth of invention and reshaping the world, but because its external results feed pleasure . . . making the end passive and possessive. . . . Material comfort and ease were magnified in contrast with the pains and risk of experimental creation.<sup>19</sup>

American urban studies theorist Richard Florida once drew admiration from city officials and developers for advocating art and cultural experiences in the course of daily life, promoting the “Creative Class lifestyle” as “a passionate quest for experience.” He looked to stimulation provided by “indigenous street-level culture — a teeming blend of cafes, sidewalk musicians, and small galleries and bistros, where it is hard to draw the line between participant and observer, or between creativity and its creators.”<sup>20</sup> Florida’s ideas and corollary statistics favored gentrification developments that cared little for existing evidence of lived culture — lifeways — instead adopting bits of it in ersatz replicas, for instance, as decorative motifs in trendy restaurants with the flavor of the uprooted past but without the lived experience.

This is a far cry from Dewey’s (and later, Pirsig’s) distinction between being a spectator or a participant in one’s own life, and from Dewey’s promotion (and subsequently, Beuys’s) of the creative ca-

capacity of all individuals. Somewhere along the way, values changed, and Dewey's philosophy of art-as-experience was repurposed so that to be a participant meant the pleasure and immediate gratification of being a consumer. But if worth is solely sited in diversionary enjoyments, then gone is the challenge that we are brought to through aesthetic experiences to make change in ourselves and society. And while Florida's notion of community is a feedback loop of perpetually expanding commerce, for Dewey community is steeped in communication and cooperation, with an eye to the common good. It is about relationship making, not place making. Unlike Florida's world, in which things — and experiences — exist in a continual consumption cycle of purchase and depletion, experiences for Dewey are an inexhaustible resource: as we breathe in and out experiences of art or in life, they are replenished with more experiences generously generated for us and for others. This, to Dewey, was what living life was all about.

Ernesto Pujol finds that “art as social practice bears the original purpose of art at its core: the evolution of human consciousness.”<sup>21</sup> Dewey would agree. Yet troublingly, he finds these projects are often “tied to American materialism in terms of collective entitlement to abundance. Some projects are not seeking individual and collective consciousness, but merely the redistribution of material wealth.” He continued:

Historically, we have witnessed the best the human spirit could offer in its desire to transcend material life. But during the twentieth century, the visual arts, which had been one of the main components of culture for hundreds of years, were imperceptibly divorced from cultural production right under our noses, slowly turned into urban commodities disconnected from Nature and populist usefulness, increasingly invested in the erasure of memory and the promotion of materialism as the hallmarks of modernity. This separation extricated the human spirit's transcendent cultural component, so all that has remained is an urban elite product based on talent, skills, esthetics, theoretical arguments, and speculative market value that regards most pre-capitalism cultural production as intellectually suspect and sentimental.<sup>22</sup>

Pujol seeks to put the visual arts back into the culture-at-large, still preserving the true meaning of consciousness, mindfulness, and intention that have been absorbed into today's lifestyle and artspeak. So in 2015, he undertook a continuous three-day performance entitled 9-5. Sited in a Wall Street office tower, he went to the source to enact "the economy of consciousness rather than of capital, or perhaps," as he wrote, "a different capital: the wealth of deep presence."

When process is a practice, it requires our full presence. Pujol calls it "vulnerability as methodology."<sup>23</sup> It starts with the beginner's mind of "don't know":<sup>24</sup> the state of conscious unknowingness, where preconceptions (to Buddhists) or habits or mere recognition (to Dewey) are set aside so that we might see what we never recognized, or re-recognize what we have come to no longer see or feel within the all-too-familiar present. It is a state of openness. Dewey believed this was a requirement for every true experimental process, of which an artist's creative process was his supreme example. The open mind is the generative place from which potentiality springs. But this is no easy feat—it only comes with practice—because opening the mind to see more clearly, to see something new or anew, is to engage the question with our whole being.

From an embodied point of view, we feel an experience before fully absorbing it into our consciousness. So the creative mind needs to be open to the workings of intuition, which are often denied as a true source of knowledge. Yet intuition is a direct link to the unconscious, to muscle memory, not just the brain but the mind-body unity of which Dewey spoke. Intuition springs from a wholeness. And Dewey knew intuition is a way of knowing that exists within all of us. "What is the landscape of permission you have to put around yourself to move from knowing to not knowing?" queries Ann Hamilton.<sup>25</sup> Recognizing intuition as a way of knowing from deep inside gives us that permission. So we need to locate it and trust it.

This process can be uncomfortable, triggering a state of uncertainty that runs counter to our natural human desire for security, Dewey admonished. The creative phase is filled with doubt and passes through a "disturbed, troubled, ambiguous, confused"<sup>26</sup> state, he wrote. Yet he observed that these chaotic periods are essential: "Life grows when a



Ernesto Pujol. 9-5, 2015. Brookfield Place Pavilion, Lower Manhattan, New York.  
Photo: Nisa Ojalvo, courtesy More Art, New York.

temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives.”<sup>27</sup> So, it is important that periods of intense striving are sustained, and Dewey thought artists are especially good at that. But practice is required.

In this process, whether in life or art, it is critical to have clarity of intent or, as Dewey said of all thinking, the “condition of our having aims.”<sup>28</sup> Goals come later. To set goals before the exploration nullifies the experimental nature of inquiry, and then we set off on the wrong track.<sup>29</sup> Instead, aims derive from articulating the right questions. Aims steer the course and guide us. They drive us with a sense of why the inquiry matters, now. Rooted in our values, aims act as barometers, so we can weather ambiguity and transcend obstacles, using knowledge that comes through research and planning as well as accidentally, all the while maintaining openness to what the process might reveal when we live it.

Dewey sought to analyze how the process of inquiry is carried out as an embodied creative continuum, identifying four stages: dialectical, relational, progressive, and continual. The dialectical stage moves between doing or trying and reflecting. The relational occurs when connections are made. In the progressive: “Each step forward, each ‘means’ used, is a partial attainment of an ‘end.’ It makes clearer the character of that end, and hence suggests to an observing mind the next step to be taken, or the means and methods to be next employed.”<sup>30</sup> But Dewey was quick to add: “While a conclusion follows from antecedents, it does not follow from ‘premises,’ in the strict, formal sense.”<sup>31</sup> Hence the process of creative inquiry is not linear, and it is also continual, so that the “time of consummation is also one of beginning anew” as a new process starts.<sup>32</sup>

The concept of means-ends continuum became a cornerstone in Dewey’s philosophy. The end of a creative process was not a “terminal point, external to the conditions that have led up to it”; rather, the end was “the continually developing meaning of present tendencies.” Then, ends become the means of propelling next stages within a sustained continuity of creativity and change. Moreover, in the continual flow of

creative process enacted, embodied, and lived, “the process is art and its product, no matter at what stage it be taken, is a work of art.”<sup>33</sup>

This is critical to an understanding of the process and ontological state (the product) of socially engaged art practice, which often delivers a creative process instead of a traditional art product as it employs life processes as an art medium. It has also become the basis for many an argument in this field. But if the process of life is ultimately “a work of art,” as Dewey said, then there is no need to demand any other aesthetic result than life itself.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, the more artists launch processes (rather than author things), the more they succeed in creating art as experiences. Thus, a project’s effect can be measured by its integration among the persons whose experiences become fuller as they are lived. Furthermore, with the dissipation of the traditional boundaries of art’s object-ness, the social bond experienced by communities, transitory or enduring, lives on as we grow and change.

In the process, social practice creates a changed reality for a place, for a person, and for a people. That is its art and it is ongoing. The “end is no longer a terminus or limit to be reached. It is the active process of transforming the existent situation. Not perfection as a final goal, but the ever-enduring process of perfecting, maturing, refining is the aim in living.”<sup>35</sup> When we practice, we live and work within this creative continuum. One creative gesture opens the way for the next unendingly.

### **Cultivating a Life Practice**

A condition of modern life is the perception that time and space are shrinking around us. Dewey experienced this throughout his own life. To reclaim a fuller experience of time and space has been one of the attractions of Buddhist mindfulness since its introduction to the US in the late nineteenth century; in the following decades it was adopted by many artists striving for deeper insight through their practice. It takes time to bring to consciousness one’s imaginings and to trust one’s intuitions, to inhabit the “empty space” that Buddhists say is not empty but full of potential. So the task becomes how to stay creative, thus, fully conscious.

One way is having a creative practice that has a sustainable rhythm, a recurring return to a generative inquiry, so that ideas can surface and flow, and results be realized. So many artists have sought meditation to further their creative practices. For Eugen Herrigel, focus achieved through meditative breathing was the way to perfect the practice of shooting an arrow. His problem was not that he had not practiced enough, but that he did not have a practice. At first, breathing was the focus, but later he wrote: "I learned to lose myself so effortlessly in the breathing that I sometimes had the feeling that I myself was not breathing but — strange as this may sound — being breathed." "Out of the fullness of this presence of mind, disturbed by no clear ulterior motive, the artist who is released from all attachment must practice his art," and "before ever he begins to devote and adjust himself to his task, the artist summons forth this presence of mind and makes sure of it through practice."<sup>36</sup> F. M. Alexander expressed the same when he said it was "not in the movement or standing but in the readiness to stand."<sup>37</sup> I see this in curating, with a readiness in attending to others' processes, solo and collective, so that they can flow and unfold; to taking care so that even seemingly incidental occurrences or ideas tentatively ventured come back to contribute should the time prove right — caring for the process both in the making and in the eventual product seen, read, heard, or felt. While it may at times appear to be "organizing," this way of curating is to have process as a practice.<sup>38</sup>

For Katie Paterson, consistent and productive tasks are meditative practices by which she finds we can "feel our orbit." With greater awareness achieved through Zen-like activities, she arrives at moments of heightened vitality, while also experiencing "breathing as a time-keeper of life." And she knows when this is lacking, "ideas are not released, I don't feel good."<sup>39</sup> She senses being out of balance with the universe. But when ideas come naturally and flow quickly, it feels freeing, and with this freedom comes a feeling of vitality. Therefore, she seeks to become attuned to the seasons, to access the landscape and follow its rhythms, and to cultivate a life art practice.

As Dewey knew, the growth we experience with greater consciousness affirms our aliveness. And Paterson shares: "I feel the most alive

when making the most of my whole mind and body, accessing all my capabilities, seeing things more clearly. This is creative, what it is to create, and grow.”<sup>40</sup> However, this is not just her remedy but one multiplied through endless examples of artists over time. And not just artists. It is what Jeon’s father experienced on the mountaintop. As Dewey intuited and then reasoned, it is the fully human way of being. The challenge is to make it last a lifetime — to become a life practice.

Finally, an opening up, a wider sense of time and space in life, is what artists offer to audiences through the experience of their art. Chögyam Trungpa writes that the art of meditative experience “is a perpetually growing process in which we begin to appreciate our surroundings in life, whatever they may be—it doesn’t necessarily have to be good, beautiful, and pleasurable at all. The definition of art, from his point of view, is to be able to see the uniqueness of everyday experience.” This “art in everyday life” is enacted as we bring this way of being an artist into everything we do.<sup>41</sup> And this is the practice many seek to find for themselves in the experience that is art.