

SEEING PRACTICE

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I.

In August 2019, I had the chance to partake in one of Isabelle Schäd's workshops entitled "OPS," short for "Open Practice Session." Isabelle is not the only choreographer using this term; in the same month in Berlin, for instance, her colleague Alice Chauchat offered an "Open Practice" prior to the premiere of her group performance "Ensembling." But what does "Open" in "Open Practice Session" refer to, in the specific case of Isabelle's work? Is it the session that is "open," open for everyone to join, accessible for professionals, amateurs, dance lovers of all kinds of backgrounds? Is it the practice that is "open," open in a way that remains to be defined, or that defies definition, open in the way that it makes participants move, or the way that it makes them perceive, sense, experience? Perhaps, is a particular quality of the "open" not to be found with those who are engaging in the practice, but with those observing it?

If practice, these days, has become an influential factor in theatre, dance, and performance, this might be precisely due to some kind of promise of openness, a vague one perhaps, but a seductive and powerful one, powerful possibly to due and not despite its vagueness. This openness comes with different names: not only "OPS", but also, to give one other example, "Extended Practices All Over", which is the title of an initiative in Lisbon curated by Paula Caspão in 2019 and 2020. The openness of practice is open, then, to different denominations. Questions, however, do not only arise with regard to the possible names and meanings of openness, they also involve practice itself. What is practice, strictly speaking? What does practice signify, conceptually and genealogically, in theatre, dance, and performance from Europe and beyond? The term has become ubiquitous in artistic discourse, and yet the values, the senses, and forces of practice remain somewhat blurred, just like the openness that it is attached to. Can Isabelle's OPS help forge a possible understanding of practice?

In the following, I intend to trace, first of all, a rather remote, perhaps somewhat surprising meaning of openness in Isabelle's OPS; from there, I will risk a provisional definition of practice in its general composition. More specifically, I will focus, initially, on a particular spatial arrangement, which is the coming together of bodies in a circle, a part of Isabelle's practice that can reveal an openness of perception precisely for those who are not inside the circle. Surfacing at the border of the circle, at the spatial and literal edge or outside of Isabelle's practice, is a different mode of spectatorship, or indeed a mode of looking that is no longer spectatorial; through this way of seeing, practice shall become visible in one of its more fundamental dimensions. That said, I will not proceed by defining practice at the outset, instead I will treat it as a search word of kinds, a notion that will reveal its contours through a slow approximation.

II.

In her invitation to the August Open Practice Session, Isabelle wrote that she intended to focus on “training and movement research as such, without any further goal of producing choreographic materials.” Notice the specificity of Isabelle’s choice of words: she did not imply that practice was incompatible with choreography, or the production of choreographic elements which might eventually be presented in the form of a performance. She only stated that, for this specific occasion, she preferred not to apply the aim of choreography to her practice. This declaration is noteworthy, because it is slightly, yet decisively different from a common assumption in contemporary artistic discourse, according to which practice and performance rather exclude each other. (At work in this latter rhetoric is often a prolongation of the critical economic debate of product versus process; practice, in this case, is summoned as the process that could undo the product-like position, the commodity status of a finished performance. Interestingly, in earlier iterations of the product versus process debate—in the neo-avant-gardes, but also in 1990s performance studies discourse—, performance was rather conceived of as the precise opposite of a product, it having been described, in its purest form, as a process without a trace. These days, the production circumstances of performance, the making of performance as a piece of work under strict economic guidelines has apparently made it that performance has lost its processual status, or at least the putative critical value of process. Instead, practice is now supposed to supersede performance as the more processual, the less economically affirmative, and therefore more open form of art, or un-form of art, for that matter. Unfortunately, such view obfuscates that practice, precisely in its processual quality as a typically continuous form of activity, is, to some extent, the symptom of an economy, which has itself become processual. This is why practice is not per se a critical instrument, but rather an instrument or a weapon that can be used for multiple purposes on the battle field of contemporary economy.)

In Isabelle’s statement, performance, or the production and performance of a choreography, is not generally the opposite of practice, but a goal, a function, or a framework that can or cannot be aligned with practice. Practice and performance are then understood as different, yet not contradictory to each other, and it seems to be rather from this perspective that bits of a genealogy and concept of practice might successfully be mapped out—the openness of practice emerging perhaps from the very gaps that open up when practice and performance meet.

III.

In the practice session that I was able to attend, practice and performance came together precisely in the form of a withdrawal of practice from performance, one though, in which practice still remained within the borders of the performance realm, or the performance space. Indeed, the question of practice and performance in Isabelle’s OPS was a primarily a matter of space, at least on that one day in August.

The spatial constellation in question was formed at the very beginning of the session. We were in Wiesenburg Halle in Wedding, a studio space, whose floor was covered with green mats. Isabelle invited us, the 20 or so participants, to gather in a circle, sit down on the mats and face inwards. She then went on to start the day by guiding us through a number of exercises, tasks that focussed mostly on alerting our perceptual capacities and attuning ourselves to the energetic states within our bodies and the group. One simple exercise, for instance, consisted in applying light pressure to our bellies with our own hands, while having them rotate in a circular fashion. In between technical instructions, Isabelle evoked images of the cellular composition of the body and the freeing of the inner self.

I am less concerned, in this context, with the specifics of each individual exercise or Isabelle's particular conception of what she calls the inner self; instead, I want to stress the importance of the circle in Isabelle's practice, a spatial composition that resonates, interestingly, with Deborah Hay's early work, when she famously practiced her Circle Dances in the Vermont of the early 1970s. Practice and the circle—a contingent nexus, yet one with consequences for the relations of perception that practice can create. It is worthwhile to remember how Hay talks about the motivation behind her Circle Dances: "in 1971", she once stated, "my Ten Circle Dances eliminates the need for dance audience. Fear finally leaves my experience as I have known it until now." Her motor, at the time, was primarily the fear of facing the audience in a performance, an affect that resulted in the creation of dances in a circle, dances that simply eliminated, as she said, "the need for dance audience." As with Isabelle's statement from earlier on, the choice of words also matters here: what the dances in the circle eliminated was not the audience per se, but the need for it. The Circle Dances did not necessarily exclude the fact that they were seen, but they were not necessarily bound to the presence of spectators as a prerequisite for the very existence and unfolding of the dance; they were able to maintain themselves without the function of the gaze of the spectator.

Precisely this is what I experienced in Isabelle's OPS: at first, I was in the circle with everyone else, participating in the exercises that Isabelle prompted us to engage in. At some point, though, I decided to step out to take notes, which was when I joined Elena Basteri, Isabelle's dramaturgical collaborator, in watching the group from the side. Stepping out of the circle and then looking at it from outside, I was able to realise how this practice in a circle does not need my outside gaze, my watching them; it does not need any spectator for it to be and do what it wants to do, the kind of body work with cellular awareness or energy dynamics that emerged within the circle. More to the point, this circle practice was not for me, not done for me as a spectator, although I was still able to look at it. It was done for and by those inside the circle, for the participants. It can therefore be said that, in the most basic and fundamental sense, the subject of the practice is the practitioner; not the spectator. Of course, those participants might have recognised Elena or me, as we were sitting outside the circle, in fact it is certainly possible that our presence changed their experience; but our presence was not necessary for them to have an experience at all, and their experiences certainly were not supposed to be directed to us as potential spectators.

In this regard, Isabelle's practice in the circle deviates strongly from the historical apparatus of theatre and performance, in which everything is ultimately done for the audience, for the spectators. Theatre, the place of looking or watching, is the place of the watching audience, it is the space that is essentially derived from the ritual, the space of a broken circle, metaphorically speaking, where those acting are not the same as those watching. The community is split, the functions of action and gaze are separated, the prerequisite of perception and experience is the non-involvement in the action, and the action has the function of showing itself to the non-involved perceivers.

Importantly though, theatre, in its history, already acquired quite some knowledge of different arrangements of perception, one of the most relevant examples being, in this context, Bertolt Brecht's "Lehrstücke." His learning plays were experiments in a theatre without audience, and Brecht was acutely aware of the consequences of his early approach for the role and function of spectatorship. He once noted: "Das Publikum würde also, sofern es nicht bei dem Experiment mithilft, nicht die Rolle des Empfangenden, sondern eines schlicht Anwesenden spielen." The spectators no longer have a necessary function within the theatrical arrangement, they are simply in the role of someone who is present, of the present one, or the attendant. My own situation in Isabelle's OPS, once I stepped out of the circle, was exactly this. Like Elena, I was an attendant of this kind, an attendant of the practice, not a spectator. It is appropriate to infer that, on at least one level, and potentially more than one, there is a genealogical con-

nection between Brecht's learning plays and certain contemporary practice approaches, or at least there is one with respect to the situation of practice in a circle that characterised Isabelle's work on that day. The specific arrangement of the circle might serve as an exemplary and condensed motif of the more general conditions of doing and attending in many contemporary practice experiments.

IV.

Since the spectator, in the learning plays or in circle practices, essentially no longer exists, that is, since anyone not participating in the designated action becomes superfluous to the event, it seems only logical to shift one's attention to the participants and ignore the attendants. However, I would like to think that the position of the attendant, who no longer has any necessary part to play in the scenario in question, might be a place from where a different, perhaps more open kind of looking could start to emerge. Looking at someone, at a group that does not need you, at people that do not do things for you, and therefore being in a relationship without necessity, you might see things otherwise, and you might see things that otherwise you did not see before. You still find yourself in an overall theatrical setting designed to make things visible, a theatre, a studio like Wiesenburg Halle, or potentially a "Pädagogium," as Brecht once called the institution he imagined for the learning plays, but what you see within this setting does not have the theatricality of the action of showing. In a way, you see something in a performance space that is not of a performance kind. Here, at the edges of performance, a different seeing might emerge.

What I was able to see, very concretely, after I had left the circle in Isabelle's OPS, was the facticity of practice. As the participants in the circle did not address me, as they did not aim to show me what they did, and how they did it, I often had trouble grasping the internal logic of the specific practice, or simply put, what it was that they were doing. But I did see them do, I did see them engage, I did see them being busy with something, even if I did not know what that something was. And is not that how practice, when ripped off its specific manifestations, might be described, that is, as a way of being busy with something? Or better yet, when taking into account the continuous and processual nature of the involvement, is not practice, at least on some basic level, a way of staying busy with something?

Seeing practice as a way of staying busy with something is certainly not entirely exclusive to the attendant. The practitioner too can experience practice in its facticity from their position of an insider, which is a way of saying that no distance is needed to experience it that way. But they will always make this experience at the same time that they practice the practice, at the same time that they are concerned with the what and the how of the practice; and as such, it will already be a different experience. In the same way, a spectator in the theatre might also be shown and see the practice of the performer in front of them, they might be shown by the performer precisely the practice of showing; but in perceiving the facticity of the practice of showing while being at the same time addressed in the process of showing, it will always already be a different kind of seeing than the seeing of the attendant. None of these forms of seeing is superior to the other, but they are different; and the seeing of the attendant is perhaps best described as the looking of someone, who is simply given in the situation, at something in its givenness.

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