

You Are Almost There: Lisa Young's Fields of Practice
—Shane Brennan

The real can only be grasped and appreciated via potentiality, and what has been achieved via what has not been achieved.

—Henri Lefebvre¹

Lisa Young's *Fortune Hunting* (2008), an online archive of found fortune-cookie texts searchable by key words, themes and sentence structures, contains a self-reflexive category: "My studio practice." By selecting this search directive, the user is treated to a portrait of the artist through the linguistic filter of fortunes: "You find beauty in ordinary things"; "I learn by going where I have to go"; "Now is the time to try something new." This portrait, rendered in an aphoristic discourse of potentiality, always refers to "what could be." Extricating the sublime from simple gestures and routines, Young's artistic practice is as much invested in the examination of quotidian phenomena as in the liberating potential of "practice" itself. An avid collector of everyday curiosities, she creates projects that are deeply engaged with gleaning and organizing, as well as the possibilities that these processes can open up. She carefully devises systemic frameworks for seeing the world and turning unformulated information into something new. Whether archiving fortunes, herding a flock of toy sheep, or dissecting the patterns of golf and figure skating, Young maintains an unwavering interest in the notions of becoming and potentiality. By emphasizing her means and methods over a preconceived result, her work retains an open embrace of what is unknown, improbable, unfinished, and unexpected. "I create a structured system," Young explains, "but what happens in that system is not entirely within my control."

To make *Calendar* (2001-2003), the artist photographed the sky every morning for one year, yielding a series of fluctuating color-field images that are installed to mimic the format of the calendar months. This endeavor, like many of her other works, is propelled by a double action: imposing rules and constraints while simultaneously relinquishing control over the final result. The allowance for chance—an airplane infiltrating the otherwise pristine blue sky, the volatility of weather patterns—is a vital counterpoint to the conceptual rigor of the project. As Sol LeWitt argues in his *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, "the logic of a piece or series of pieces is a device that is used at times only to be ruined."² Young's methodology involves a careful negotiation of what is predictable and unpredictable within the system she dictates, and when the system itself should be allowed to unravel. In *Calendar*, she sets out to accomplish the task of documenting subtle climatological changes in a familiar yet subjective way. In doing so, she demonstrates the inherent limitations of her method: one photograph or point of view, or even a series of them, could never represent an entire year of atmospheric trends. Like LeWitt's wall drawings, the magic

¹ "Clearing the Ground" in *Critique of Everyday Life, vol. 2: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, 1961 (trans. John Moore. London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 45.

² In *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 10 (June 1967), p. 79-83.

of Young's work lies in the rift between the poetic simplicity of her aim and the arduous path she travels to get there.

The haunting, ambiguous phrase "You are almost there," included in Young's *Fortune Hunting*, encapsulates the interrogative open-endedness of her practice, projecting both the mantra of the practitioner trying to master a skill and a philosophical profundity that seems to describe the work of living itself. This phrase is at once empty and loaded, recalling On Kawara's poignant telegram project, wherein the artist disseminated a single message—"I AM STILL ALIVE"—to his friends and colleagues. Both statements imply an endpoint—a "there," or, in Kawara's case, the finitude of his own death—but each dodges specificity. There is of course a difference: while Kawara's eventual death is a certainty, we are left to wonder if the "there" in Young's fortune can ever be reached, or whether it is instead the idealized projection of a destination, a mirage that is never arrived at, only approached *ad infinitum* as it recedes on the horizon. "Sometimes the object of the journey," reads another fortune, "is not the end but the journey itself."

Carrying out a conceptual project involves a commitment to methodical, intermediate actions. This is the domain of practice, the "steps along the way" that propel a project forward, and it is a field that Young's work investigates from within. Each of the seven sections of *Practice* (2007) shows a golfer attempting to complete putts from varying distances. An antithesis to the highlight reel of competitive sports, the video shows the golfer's trials and errors in real time as he carries out the diligent, repetitive labor required to improve his abilities. After each attempt, he registers a flash of satisfaction or disappointment and begins again, regardless of the outcome. For Young, this focused repetition becomes liberating. "The deviation into practice," writes Michael Sheringham, "is designed precisely to suspend judgment and 'see what happens.'"³ The practitioner's repeated motions untether meaning from the telos and folds it back on itself, creating an "intermediate spatio-temporal zone,"⁴ an eddy in the flow of linear narrative where ideas, emotions, and possibility remain in circulation.

Lyra Angelica (2004) juxtaposes four different ice-skating performances of Michelle Kwan's long program, "Lyra Angelica." By synchronizing the four performances—four outcomes of the same set of maneuvers—Young disrupts the primacy of a singular, definitive order of events. Instead, she draws our attention to the moments where the different versions of Kwan's routine overlap and diverge. *Lyra Angelica* visualizes how, in the terrain of practice, events are multiplied and relative: playing out one way, only to occur differently in the next iteration. In fact, aptitude in skating and golf—the flawless triple loop or the accurate putt—is measured precisely by their repeatability. Their successful reiteration essentially

³ Michael Sheringham, "Configuring the Everyday" in *The Everyday* (London: Whitechapel/Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), p. 146.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

illustrates the very meaning of the word “routine.” As a result, on the ice rink and the golf course successes and failures are experienced repeatedly, entangling the emotions of the athlete and the spectators in what one might call an “emotional-temporal” zone. When the golfer misses a shot and sighs, or when Kwan falls on the ice, we cringe, but only for a moment, knowing that inevitably each will try again. Repetition, through Young’s re-articulations of these activities, becomes an evocative force.

In her many ventures to “see what happens,” Young’s work questions what kinds of unexpected effects are produced through the recurrent activity of practice. What remains in circulation, what degrades and what phenomena occur in this system? Can routine movements contain the potential for exaltation? In *Transcendent Machine* (2000) figures on a rooftop release strands of toilet paper into the sky, where the ribbons begin to form rarefied, captivating shapes as they interact with air currents. A gap develops, Young explains, “between the lowly signifier and the exalted signified.” The effect of the floating white paper is simultaneously commonplace and awe-inspiring. As her title suggests, Young is interested in how the transcendental can be generated in a mechanistic cycle: produced artificially—through the act of tossing paper to the wind—and, in turn, consumed by onlookers, whose perceptions of this event transform it into a resplendent spectacle.⁵ Young might be thought of as the engineer of this “transcendent machine.” Her representations of found material encourage a sublime reading that is rendered legible by the interpretation of the viewer.

In *Drives* (2008), the artist systematically selects every shot in a televised PGA tournament depicting the golf ball in flight. These clips, which track the ball during the live television coverage, are often deemed extraneous to the game’s narrative and edited out of the rebroadcast footage. One could hypothesize, however, that they are removed for another reason: they jump out as uncanny, difficult to resolve and potentially disruptive to the steady unfurling of the competition. Their extraction, instead, allows the viewer to conjure a direct, idyllic narrative bridge between the moment the ball is struck and when it returns to earth.

Unlike *Transcendent Machine* and *Practice*, the agents of the action in *Drives* are completely absent. Young’s focus here is exclusively on the object of their forceful actions. Her video evokes Paul Pfeiffer’s *John 3:16* (2000), a remix of basketball footage in which the ball hovers, planet-like, in the center of the frame with the action spiraling around it—shattering the narrative of the game and pulling the viewer’s gaze into orbit around the ball as a locus of desire. Watching *Drives*, we experience a defamiliarization of subject matter and a collapse of scale. In the absence of narrative cues—the golfer’s swing, the ball landing on the green—we are presented with fragments of the sphere’s erratic trajectory

⁵ This idea is partially indebted to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who, in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), postulated “desiring-production” or “desiring machines,” countering Freud by reimagining desire as socially constructed and productive rather than an unconscious force rooted in individual lack.

across the sky, like a kinetic version of Gabriel Orozco's perspective-confounding photograph, *Ball on Water* (1994). Reframing our expectations for successful resolution, Young asks us to focus on the moments of suspense, uncertainty and possibility before the ball's flight is completed. Stringing these interstitial moments together while preserving their temporal order, she creates what is best described as the empyreal effect of practice, a condition where repetition blurs together with the sublime in a hypnotic pattern of presence, absence, and potentiality. "The formal structure, a minimalist strategy of viewer completion and involvement," offers Allen Ruppertsberg, "is one of fragment, space, fragment, space, fragment, fragment, space, space, space."⁶

The tension between worldly materials and sublime effect is also at work in *Buoy* (2004). Viewed from up close, the massive Xerox exhibits the scars and imperfections that manifest themselves as part of the reproduction process, creating an abstract pattern of positive and negative space. Viewed from across the room, however, the marks and fractures coalesce into a dreamlike image of a buoy floating at sea, mirroring the disorienting figure-ground abstraction in *Drives*. *Buoy* takes the process of meaning production—how information combines to form a recognizable image—and spatializes it over a physical distance. The effect is disquieting: the buoy—a metaphor for survival and preservation—is only interpretable when it is too far away to grasp. A similar disjunction is found in Vija Celmins' *Star Field* drawings (1982-1983), which oscillate between surface detail and the incomprehensible vastness of outer space, or Wolfgang Tillmans' eerily faded photocopy enlargements of his own photographs. For each of these artists, large shifts in scale and the erosion of information convey a longing for that which can be only partially materialized—intertwining the entropic properties of memory and the physical limitations of mechanical reproduction.

Lisa Young's practice succeeds in establishing an interrogative methodology of seeing and ordering the diverse material of everyday life. She pays particular attention to how lines of thought can emerge from a preoccupation with repeated gestures. *Flocking* (2008) presents a collection of figurines in a continuum of visual styles—some realistic, others pushing the limits of what signifies "sheep"—and stands as a metaphor for her approach to art making. Despite their different appearances, all of the animals are part of the same flock, an assemblage migrating towards some unknown destination. Suspended en-route, they epitomize the significance of the journey itself and the potential to go anywhere. Never arrived, they are continually "almost there." This is an intermediate space where, to quote the final words of *Lyra Angelica*'s voiceover commentary, "everything is possible." Young's work suggests that we could learn to remain here—with practice.

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⁶ Allen Ruppertsberg, "Fifty Helpful Hints on the Art of the Everyday" in *The Secret of Life and Death* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985), p. 113.

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