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The Artist As
Producer,
Quarry,
Thread,
Director,
Writer,
Orchestrator,
Ethnographer,
Choreographer,
Poet,
Archivist,
Forger,
Curator,
and Many Other
Things First

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The Artist as Quarry Suhail Malik and Tirdad Zolghadr

In November 2016, curator Tirdad Zolghadr's contribution to "The Artist As" lecture series polemically stated that artists are always falling prey to something or other—censorship, curators, bad lighting, jetlag, bigotry, cultural prejudice, institutions in particular or The Institution At Large. Never are they complicit in any of these things. His lecture's goal was not to trace examples of when victimisation was real or imagined, but to pin down the rationale of self-marginalisation within the moral economy of contemporary art. And to speculate how this rationale might be translated into a more meaningful professional identity, with more tangible political traction, over time.

The conversation below builds on that point of departure. It aims to help artists understand themselves as institutional actors within the field of art without defining this institutionalisation as an intellectual loss or strategic compromise. In fact, artists who drop the guard of personal self-protection and cease to emphasise individual self-interest can now access the real prerogatives that contemporary art has to offer. In the terms set out by Zolghadr's lecture, the proposed move is from "quarry as victim" to "quarry as mine or reserve"; from the pathos of hunted prey to contemporary art as a resource to be mined collectively.

Over recent years, academic Suhail Malik, currently based at Goldsmiths, University of London, has been invested in theoretical work he sees as conducive to a necessary 'exit' from contemporary art. Zolghadr, though not necessarily in favour of exit strategies, has drawn extensively from Malik's recent work, in the context of both curatorial projects and his most recent publication, *Traction* (Sternberg Press, 2016).

TIRDAD ZOLGHADR

What's striking when you talk to any artist today is the sense of professional frustration they feel, culminating again and again in a lose-lose situation: "My name is up in lights, but I'm broke and exhausted"; "I'm only invited because I'm from the Middle East"; "I'm not invited because I'm from the Middle East"; "The curator won't stop emailing me and asking me questions"; "The curator is ignoring me."

When unpacked, what seems to be a very diverse set of complaints, in my view, arise from the fact that artists are still working on premises that were defined and institutionalised around fifty years ago. At this time, a certain sense of bohemian open-endedness was to the artist's advantage because art was still tightly and suffocatingly circumscribed by criticism and art history. And since then, both the artist's role in the moral economy of contemporary art and within the larger art field has morphed into the omnivore it now is.

Artists use a rhetoric of indeterminacy to demand ubiquitous access to any discipline, tradition, or institution they desire, without ever (or rarely) being held accountable for what it does once they get there.

SUHAIL MALIK

Yet the artist is still a quarry of some oppressive and demanding Other, which is also usually their condition of visibility. Tough break. Is that what you mean by 'moral economy'?

TZ

I'm borrowing the term from Didier Fassin, a sociologist who uses that metaphor to help us understand the mechanisms of valorisation that govern a habitus.¹ The article is an account of how certain things are valorised more than others and made visible more than others in certain groups at certain times. And these valorisations—visualisations—circulate according to particular rules. Some things are invested in, others are divested from, and so on.

Helpfully, Fassin has borrowed the term from the famous Marxist historian E. P. Thompson, who used the term to talk about medieval England, when it was expected from the Crown to share bread with the needy. And the contrast is helpful because in Thompson's sense, that was an economy that can be called moral—

SM

Because there is a moral obligation for the rich here?

TZ

Exactly, whereas Fassin is talking about an economy of morals—what is considered moral and what is not, at which point in time, where and why.

SM

So, your contention is that it is such an economy that gives artists the moral privileges to articulate themselves as they

¹ Didier Fassin, "Les Économies Morales Revisitées", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, no. 6 (2009): 1237–1266, www.cairn.info/revue-annales-2009-6-page-1237.htm.

want, present their concerns, make political and ethical and social claims, and so on? I'm also wondering how the pragmatic moral economy of the double-bind you've identified—of the artist as quarry—operates with regard to the art? Does it make a difference if someone is doing highly conformist and commercialised work or if they're doing hardcore anti-commercial art?

TZ

Not to dodge your question, but I would slightly rephrase. I'll answer by saying that the rule applies as long as you can call the work contemporary art. And you can call it contemporary art even in the case of works by certain politically ambitious, anarcho-leftist, unapologetically activist artists, because most of them will, at some point, insist that they are not here to tell people what to do. Rather, they are here to ask questions, and, in fact, telling people what to do is part of the problem. And then you're back in the same boat. That said, I believe there are artists out there who are doing work that they are this *close* to considering as part of their practice but aren't making that final step in calling it that because this would make for a much too radical rupture with contemporary art as we know it. Here I am thinking, for example, of Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal, who shy away from referring to their work in refugee camps as their art, unapologetically.

SM

Lise Soskolne from activist organisation W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), who is close to us both, also falls into this category. She makes clear that the project of mobilising for a payment standard across the board in the contemporary art sector is not her art.²

Returning to the artist-as-quarry, the construction relies on a systemic commitment, or acceptance, or endorsement, in contemporary art that it is only the asking of questions. Which is also a question begging: limited to the setting up a set of problems; to irresolution; to subtracting definiteness and determinacy; to hesitation. But what supports the moral economy of the artist's pragmatic situation? What is the relation between the indeterminacy-convention of the contemporary artwork and the double-bind of the artist's moral economy? It doesn't have to be the case that they go together, but, for you, they seem to support one another.

TZ

You've said that artists can deploy curatorial tools in order to transcend their status as quarry, to think in a future-oriented, institutionally grounded, and strategically ambitious fashion. As part and parcel of an artist's to-do list rather than something they dabble in, temporarily, tactically, as a necessary evil. This is necessary because within the current moral

²
Lise Soskolne, "You and Your Critics", in "The Value of Contemporary Art", ed. Jason Bowman, Suhail Malik, and Andrea Phillips, special issue, *PARSE* Journal, no. 2 (Autumn 2015): 11–16, <http://parsejournal.com/content/uploads/PARSE-Journal-Issue-2-The-Value-of-Contemporary-Art.pdf>.

economy, the artist is not expected to think about things such as organising an audience or persuading them, let alone long-term strategising of where this art is supposed to lead, or how working conditions could be improved over time, or how can we construct institutions that build all of these things. All of which would mean the artist being understood as a resource or as something to be mobilised or mined for external ends. Taken as a beneficial condition, that is another, contrary sense of “quarry” to that of prey.

Artists sometimes think about these things—when there’s time and inclination to do so—but they are yet to be framed as an integral component of artisthood. Within the division of labour that is implicitly, tacitly, sometimes explicitly, accepted, these are part of the curator’s job. It’s obvious that this is a disidentification with power on the artist’s part—it disempowers the artist—which shouldn’t come as a surprise because that’s key to setting the double-bind that defines the artist-as-quarry.

While in Brisbane, I had the privilege of being introduced to Josh Milani, an articulate and successful Brisbane gallerist who represents a number of Indigenous artists. He’s done an amazing job of mapping out where his gallery should be situated politically, historically—where it’s trying to go strategically, and how it’s trying to support its artists within an Australian context—in ways that Hauser & Wirth would never dream

of even attempting to do. His artists were equally fascinating to listen to: they had a political vision; a clear idea of what they wanted from their audience; and were aligned with a certain set of historical facts which they were unwilling to negotiate on. Several of them were invited to documenta 14, where they would be situated with a hundred other artists with a hundred other competing agendas. In situations such as this, the best a gallerist can do is offer access and the most an artist can demand is access. However, it’s access to a moral economy where the cards are stacked in a way that your political vision will have zero purchase. It’s not enough to simply lobby for access and celebrate when you get it. The work itself is in need of an institutional and discursive setup that imposes a particular political appetite. Otherwise—and to return directly to your question on the relation between the pragmatics and content of art—there is very little difference between an Indigenous artist in Brisbane and your random tourist at documenta.

Perhaps you’d insist that separating the artist-as-quarry from the curator and other actors in the art field is kind of missing the point, and argue instead for a more across-the-board tactic, putting artists, curator and maybe the writer and the scholar in the same boat. Is that accurate?

SM

Yes and no. I think the reason for the ‘quarry status’ of the artist is their sustained victimhood, which is appreciated

across the board in the art field because it's not just a psychological fact of artists but a role that's taken and supported by contemporary art's entire infrastructure and sociology. It's kind of an expected configuration of what an artist should do. It's not just acceptable for artists to be caught in this double-bind and to complain about it, as a quarry-prey of the art field. It's *desired* that they do all of this. It's mandated.

Perhaps these behaviours are ingrained in art school or 'in the field' as a form of mimicry. Or perhaps they accrete through encounters with institutions, and advice from other artists. Whatever the cause, the question for me is what's being protected as well as surrendered by taking up that role? What are the reasons for it?

When it comes to curators, there seems to be more variation permitted in how to take that role without betraying some purportedly authentic core of the experience, as artists would if they let go of their status as art's exploited prey. There's the pragmatic, institutionally directed curator, who works primarily as an institutional actor. The exhibitions they are involved in are collateral, tools to operate institutionally. Then you get the other kind of curator who wants to be receptive and responsible to an artist's culture, shares the irks and responsibilities of working in gallery or museum spaces, and takes these extraneous burdens to be the truth of artistic work. This kind of curator identifies more with the artist. But I think everyone in the art field who follows the contemporary

art paradigm in fact takes both roles, artists included. That's the double-bind of agency in contemporary art again.

I'd say that the contemporary art field is organised by this pragmatic melding of formal and informal institutionalisations. Formal institutionalisation means the regulated organisations that have statutes, are limited and somewhat inflexible, and are prescriptive because of their bureaucratic administrative limitations, their fixed hierarchies, and so on. Informal institutions are the kinds of spontaneous arrangements of reception and appreciation between enthusiastic and bitchy but authentically engaged actors in the art field, which is contemporary art's proper circuit of valuation and engagement. It's what Arthur Danto named the "artworld" in the mid-1960s.

TZ

Is an invitation to a big show a formal or an informal occasion?

SM

Because it's big, such an invitation is usually a formal invitation built on pre-existing informal alliances. There is also the call for applications, which is a formal process, as the call is being made—a claim of fairness and accessibility made by a jury of judges—but the selection from such a call is strongly shaped by informal interests. The jury makes calls to friends to get people to apply and give a little wink on the side...

TZ

I have no idea what you're talking about!
[Laughter]

SM

Let's see if that makes it through our editing and revisions...

Obviously, these kinds of informal moves to the side are ways of securing relevant and well-placed participants, so it's not a waste of time and resources for everyone. The general point is that this informal/formal mix means that the contemporary art field operates according to the two sociologies of our field, combined and working in tandem. And, in trying to negotiate the informal and formal institutionalisation of art simultaneously, the moral economy of the quarry or prey is shared by everyone in contemporary art. The normative demands of each kind of institutionalisation is distinct and maybe even contradictory: on its formal side, there are impersonal statutes, regulations, top-down institutional precedence, committee meetings; on the side of informal institutionalisation, there are spontaneous alliances and mutual recognition, flexibility and ground-up loose alliances, drinks and dinners.

According to this latter set-up, which could be called its 'spontaneous' sociology, contemporary art really *should* work through its informal institutionalisation. You trust the network you have, built on allegiances in ideas, convictions, personality, taste, loose affiliations, and recommendations. There's

something morally good about a trust network. By the same token, it's also a back-slapping network of collusions. Let's not be mistaken about that.

TZ

It's one of the few things you cling to in terms of a sense of security.

SM

Yes, but the informal institution is a network condition that is highly precarious, unlike the formal institution, which is constrained and stabilised by its statutes.

TZ

Of course, but it's a *sense* of security, rather than genuine security, that you cling to.

SM

Yes, even though it's a security you can't rely on and which can change at any moment. Otherwise you wouldn't have a double-bind: you trust your friends to be in a show or do a publication with you, and that's a good relationship. We do it for each other and there's some reputational gain, some revenue, which is fine and nice, and our relationship is strengthened as is the little clump of the network we are plugged into.

But it doesn't work *just* like that. I think the double-bind that validates the quarry status is composed of *both* the satisfactions *and* the anxieties of these kinds of arrangements which are the ubiquitous formation of contemporary art. It's not the aristocracy giving bread; it's us putting

each other into exhibitions, setting up publications, talks, workshops, residencies, and so on. Typically, I want to do this discussion because it's with you, I like the topic, blah blah blah. And there are other interests that intersect with the dimension of formal institutionalisation: a publication such as this one serves me well with regard to my institution, and so on. There are definitely a series of satisfactions and gains at a number of levels. But there's also an anxiety around the fact that you need to keep doing this kind of stuff or it'll dry up and you'll become unwanted. Slide into oblivion.

I know I'm going on a bit but there is one more important thing to note: if we're asking about a moral economy, we also need to question what the gains are in being a quarry. Why is this logic of victimhood so pervasive? It satisfies a political and moral logic. It would be instructive to understand what the current investments are in the double-bind, in the putatively desirable limitations of the put-upon victim model.

TZ

What are the limitations?

SM

You mentioned them earlier: you don't strategise, you're not prescriptive, you don't build institutions, you just stay locked into a disidentification from power.

TZ

And what are the gains?

SM

This is where we return to the artist-as-quarry, in the sense of being prey, as a paradigmatic figure. We need to understand where it comes from, which means a historical, genealogical, sociological account of why we are where we are. We can't do that here, but my sense is that its effect is systemic and overwhelming, even conditional. It's now impossible to exist in the contemporary art system *in good faith*, and as a trustworthy character, without expressing some sense of being a quarry. You have to understand yourself and constantly demonstrate that you are somehow subjected to larger forces beyond your control that are demanding things of you, that force your otherwise good intentions or the authenticity of your practice into a compromised institutional formation. People who say, "Hey, just do these things", as they would in any other profession, obviously don't get what's special about being in contemporary art.

If artists' complaints express a structuring double-bind, acquiescence to which is a kind of entry requirement to be a valid member of the artworld, perhaps it's indulged and endorsed by kindly nodding heads all round because it testifies that art should be intrinsically anti-professional, that the commitments are authentic and existential. Imagine the counterfactual: the accountant who comes in and says, "Oh! This is completely against my intentions of what it is to be an accountant! Your demand for the double-entry book-keeping of your accounts is so

problematic to my practice of accountancy.”
It just doesn’t happen: you come in, you do
the job, and you go.

TZ

I agree that we are talking about
the broader brush strokes which apply
to everyone in equal—or at least,
comparable—measure and we have grown
into it. And we have also outgrown it
in the same way that Oxford University
looks like something out of the fourteenth
century. Oxford is still trapped within
an ideological and material housing which
bleeds into its actual workings, and
you’d have to come with a stick of dynamite
to jumpstart anything radically new there.
I’m too much of a boring, middle-of-the-
road sort of reformist social democrat
—I would just redecorate the windows
or something. But maybe I should move
away from that metaphor.

SM

Please. With names like ours and the
current security conditions...

TZ

On the other hand, the independent curator
is comparable to the artist, in the sense
that indeterminacy can be advantageous
just as the minimum wage is good for
someone who needs a job at McDonald’s.
It allows you entry-level participation
in a structure that will never be more than
a limited, exploitative means to an end
—an end that hopefully justifies the said
means. Only then is it empowering. If the

minimal wage is the best you’re hoping for,
then it’s never going to be to your benefit.

SM

The question for the curator, which
is the same as for the artist endorsing
indeterminacy as the condition
and requirement of their practice, is:
what is power then understood to be?

TZ

The benefits of the status quo are, firstly,
a particular kind of glamour, which might
account for 90 percent of cases of people
gravitating toward art at the entry
level. To study art goes back to ideas dating
back centuries or more, to a particular
idea of artistic agency that is not applied
to curators. And, secondly, indeterminacy
as a tactic. For example, when I spoke
about the artist-as-quarry in Beirut,
the artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan objected
that if it weren’t for indeterminacy,
he would never have access to those court
rooms or NGOs where he does his bidding
as an artist.

SM

You’re baiting me. As you know, I don’t
talk about specific practices in public
or outside of teaching situations. What
I’ll say in general is that the court depends
on evidence presented as such, to establish
what the facts are. Such evidence has to
be determining if not itself determinate.
That is what supports an indictment,
a prosecution, and the finality of the verdict.

TZ

But can *art* be a valid instrument to have the officer's ear, the judge's ear, the NGO technocrat's ear? If you were to present yourself as transparently consequential, you would not gain the trust of these institutional agents.

SM

In this logic, the power actors can only be acted upon because they trust the artist who has disidentified from them and all that they represent because you've already consented and admitted that the artist should *not* make consequential claims against the power mechanism. This is another version of the moral economy: it's the double-bind again.

The same thing happens with contemporary art's benefactors or collector base, especially the plutocratic collector base. Of course, you want to get close to those people because they have the money to support the practice, to support the educational institutions, to support museums, spaces, scenes, and so on. But what is the cost to the claims that can be made through art by this ear-getting? You can build a culture which is inclusive of the powerful, the plutocrats, the military, the judiciary, and so on, but this is an affiliation with power on its own terms. As an art of indeterminacy, contemporary art systemically incapacitates its actors from doing anything other than being *near* the power of others. The sometimes-demanding counterclaims against power actors that can be articulated through art can then be paradoxically—even perversely—

condoned by the powerful because such contentions remain just claims, neutralised. Contemporary art becomes what it now predominantly is: a playground of free ideas demonstrating the capacity and success of a liberal polity.

TZ

Can I bring it even closer to home and put you on the spot in terms of your being a member of faculty at Goldsmiths? You are Co-Director of the MFA Fine Art programme there, which is fully plugged into the contemporary art operating system. Which approaches do you try to think through with your students?

SM

The Goldsmiths Fine Art teaching programmes are clearly set up to meet the contemporary art mould, and have maybe even helped inform it, so it might be instructive to outline it a bit. The teaching model developed in the mid-late 1980s is now one that most art schools adopt: students have many interactions with many tutors. It's the pedagogic equivalent of the biennial or the gallery tour: you experience many things and struggle to make sense of each experience, never mind what it means overall. The pedagogy, which I take seriously, requires tutors to be responsive to artist-students' work and their interests. I am to support whatever they do rather than impose my own doctrine. They see someone else the following week, who might say something totally different. My voice

is one among others (though of course I don't really think it should be, and I suspect that no one else thinks theirs ought to be either).

Within our teaching structure, one input is immediately qualified by another—not necessarily a direct opposition or negation, but a set of views in which the student has to make their own decision. Students can, however, end up hedging, as I think many do, rather than deciding to go one way or another. And even in doing that they individuate themselves and their practice. That's probably why the model works so well in the contemporary art formation and has been taken up in so many places. It certainly guides students into the standard contemporary art channels, which is, after all, what they are in the programme to learn to do.

Whatever the fate of the particular artist or curator, you necessarily end up with a classic liberal formation of a field that is very capacious *and* very atomised; a set of highly individualised practices, each determined on its own terms independently of institutional arrangements. This structure relies upon and reproduces the appreciation on all sides of a plurality of inputs or contributions. The institution is only an extraneous support mechanism to the core actor. The artist is then already formatted as in a double-bind: they don't need the institution, they rely on it; they want more input and feedback; they should make up their own minds. The institution is in the way of the artist's self-realisation—and it sets itself up like that. The downside

(which is really the same thing but not out in terms of contemporary art) is that the artist-as-quarry can be articulated but not programmatically challenged, unless there's a major overhaul of its structure and ideology. But it's a successful programme. Double-bind again...

TZ

Right.

SM

It's not right to put all this on the students because it's an issue of institutional systemics. But the harder, broader programmatic issue for us to confront is that this is an ethics. It's tightly formulated by the Derridean double-bind structure you mentioned:³ The double-bind sets up a very clear oppositional structure, balancing external demands against your internal good wishes and, though you contend with this situation in your own terms, whatever you do is a moment of authentic self-realisation and validation. That's an important gain in being a quarry: the narcissistic bonus of being at the centre of institutional limitations organised (in your view, at least) around you because they have only have so much money, not more, only so much time, not more. There are always too many demands that impinge themselves again and again on me, me, me.

The double-bind validates a moment of subjective decision that is existentially powerful. There's a reward in the art system

3

For example, see Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), especially 15ff.

because there's more existential commitment to what you're doing. The double-bind structure of being quarry-prey-victim is something that's less characteristic of fully professional services. There, as I said earlier, you go to your job, you do it, and nobody cares about your existential commitments. But the existential commitments of the artist are external only to this caricature of corporate life.

More carefully put, the double-bind of contemporary art offers a gain by requiring an endorsement of personalised subjectivity that professionalisation is explicitly dedicated to limiting or channelling into more or less standard formats. The complaint of the artist-as-quarry demonstrates an existential authenticity that signifies in the art field—and for it—in a way that doesn't necessarily matter elsewhere. But there are also clear limitations as to what people in the art field are trying to do, and even what the field as a whole can achieve.

TZ

Perhaps we can end with two points. The first point is that I'd say most of us share an intuitive assumption that there is such a thing as resistance, or criticality, or creativity, outside the materiality of the ruling ideology around us, outside the infrastructure. This is what makes the disidentification with power feel more natural than it otherwise would be. The second point is linked to what we were saying earlier about disidentification, be it from the audience, the idea that your

art does not need to create a public, that it's there for its own sake.

It's not there to form a constituency, let alone stand up for the kind of political programme that is implicit in this constituency. It's autonomous. Even though art constantly creates audiences *de facto*, it cannot see itself as responsible for them. On the contrary, the only gesture it thinks is legitimate is that of crowning the audience king and queen: "You are the ones in the seat of power, the ones who will decide what this artwork ultimately is."

SM

I would say that it's *not* that artists or art do not expect a public, it's just the type of public it is should be spontaneously formed out of its own interest around a work. Contemporary art should not set itself up for a pre-existing public, and certainly not prescribe one (beyond the regular appreciator of contemporary art, of course). And it constitutes itself. The work becomes a seeding mechanism for a public it doesn't determine. Consequently, contemporary art's indeterminacy isn't just around the formal concerns—the meaning structure, the work—but also the type of public it eventually establishes for itself, or which it establishes around the art. And as for the art itself, that means that the audience-public can, in principle, be anything at all. It's not a programmatic public. That's why the opening filled with plutocrats (hopefully) doesn't matter, even if the art demonstrates a palpable concern with refugees, gentrification, trans-

intersectionality, and so on. There's no contradiction there, much as many on the left might wish there were.

Clearly, there are palpable material and institutional gains from contemporary art's quarry status, not least the self-protection it permits for those who take it up—which is just about everyone. Such self-protection is the condition for making the non-standard claim, which is the basic premise of contemporary art and what is wished from it. The quarry status practically and ostentatiously demonstrates that, contrary to professionalisation, you are *not* just doing what people are expecting you to do, that your production is not externally directed. Rather, it's deeply held, committed, existentially significant. And that's what we want from the art field: the non-standard, the counterpoint, the critical and meant position. You want to preserve the space for the independent claim. Art continues to do that because of the structures we are highlighting here, including the celebration and indulgence of the double-bind.

But we're then in a meta double-bind, a kind of double-bind of the double-bind. The institutionalised autonomy required for art to do all the things wanted of it, including making independent and non-standard proposals of contemporary art, means that art can only go so far without losing its self-protection. It can't prescribe a public; it can't be too deliberate in its meanings or too determinate; it can't be too directly political or social

interventionist. The gain of the quarry status isn't just the existential assertion of the artist, it's also the protection of a space of production which doesn't simply follow institutional or prescribed diktats. And we kind of want that, don't we? At least, that's the normative premise of contemporary art. The cost is that we can't follow through on this wish other than to say, "We can do these very specific things which also require us to be highly victimised—or compromised—and necessarily so within a limit."

This doesn't have to be interpreted as a problem. It works well on its own terms. If it is a problem, then it's one of art's effectiveness and following through in the stated commitments. As you said before we formally started this discussion, we need to decide what strategies and interventions need to be made. What changes need to be put into place to think of the art field as a productive resource that can do the kinds of things that we advocate? How can we build specific institutions, be prescriptive, make explicit demands, rather than business as usual? For that, art's self-protection has to be undone. That is the condition for effecting the other sense of the artist-as-quarry you mentioned earlier—not as prey but as an extractable resource.

The Artist As is based on a lecture series with the same title that ran throughout 2016. It was presented at the Institute of Modern Art (IMA), Brisbane, and at Monash University's Faculty of Art Design & Architecture (MADA), Melbourne, as part of the Curatorial Practice programme.

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