“Practice makes perfect” is a false euphemism. Practice makes something, but it’s never perfection since humans are intrinsically imperfect. At most, practice creates exceptional or extraordinary ability, the best of the best—think Olympians, Nobel prize-winning scientists, or master chefs. More often, practice makes competent, cohesive, or effective. In certain industries or disciplines, practice is a behind-the-scenes activity that leads to on-stage success, something that informs but is not displayed or celebrated. In other areas, like law, medicine, and art, practice is (philosophically) the focus; the process of repeating acts to deepen and sharpen skill is revealed because it is the purpose, the point.

Practice is a central focus in the work of Kevin Jerome Everson. In general, his films and videos consider the performance of identity and the rituals of labor. Everson’s African American subjects execute simple, obligatory, or repetitious actions for the camera: in How to Remain Human, this includes magicians doing sleights of hand, watching a fireworks display, blowing out birthday candles, and trying to fold a map. Everson’s artwork is strongly informed by his upbringing in Mansfield, Ohio. He began his artistic career in Cleveland in the 1990s, first exhibiting at MOCA Cleveland in 1991.

Although his imagery is familiar and direct, Everson is not a documentary filmmaker. He creates deliberate vignettes that combine fiction and realism. Some feature actors and objects the artist makes, like the manhole covers in Fe26 (2014). Others chronicle precise, framed moments in Everson’s personal life, like Vanilla Cake with Strawberry Filling (2014), which records a memorial for the artist’s son.

With reference to practice, all of Everson’s films can be seen as his ongoing practice of being an artist, honing his craft one work at a time. He states: “Procedure is the formal quality I am exploring with the work. The process is the execution of the formal quality. Once I have a grasp of procedure, the process becomes a discipline.”

Several films in How to Remain Human portray practice, but Tygers (2014) is the most obvious example. A short film depicting football drills for a group of high school athletes at Mansfield High School in Mansfield, Ohio, it literally portrays practice. Players execute moves two, maybe three times each, making subtle adjustments with every attempt. Some come at the camera, others run away, all in set patterns. Everson intersperses their movements with close-up portraits wherein helmeted players practice looking “the part”: stoic, fierce, confident.
Throughout the film, the players drill directly in front of the camera, as if it were a linesman or coach. In showing different students executing the same drills/movements, Everson demonstrates the nuances of practice, the ways in which individuals performing the same tasks are intrinsically different (better or worse, advanced or beginner, etc.). Although training to create a cohesive team, each player shows degrees of promise and growth. Like in a play, the empty stadium behind them is a stage, used now for rehearsal, but soon for the main “performance.” The camera flits and focuses at times, reinforcing the in-progress, working-on-it nature of this subject.

Tygers is silent. We never hear the quarterback’s count, the football’s smack against his gloved hand, the panting and heaving of speedy transitions, the taunting from opposing players, the coach’s direction and feedback. This silence, coupled with the film’s grainy black-and-white palette and tight, frontal vantage point, removes all distractions from the singular task at hand. Ultimate focus—a core element of practice.

Practice requires time; they are necessary bedfellows. How much time is endlessly variable depending on the task. At just two minutes, Tygers doesn’t depict a “full” football practice. Moreover, we never see the game, never know the payoff. We assume that the athletes repeat these actions often, for hours, several times a week, over the course of many months, even years. Long time is insinuated both in the repetitive nature of the action and in its lack of narrative.

Everson’s deliberate application of (brief) time, (no) color, and sound(lessness) in Tygers connects notions of practice and performance. Although we are watching a football practice, the film is not just about practicing football. In just two minutes, Everson swiftly and deftly captures the expressions, gestures, poses, movements, interactions, and environment that these players employ to perform a particular identity, one deeply significant in the Midwest. This identity is more than just playing football—it’s also about playing masculine, playing teammate, playing submissive, playing fearless, playing consistent, playing tough. And playing “perfectly,” of course, a performance best realized through lots and lots of practice.

Kevin Jerome Everson

tygers, 2014
still from 16mm film, 00:02:00

courtesy of the artist; trilobite arts-dac; picture palace pictures

copyright kevin jerome everson
Growing up people thought we were rich because both of my parents worked. My mom was a bank teller and my dad was an auto mechanic. Also, people thought we were rich because we had two cars. The illusion of art is that it is of the leisure class. But, that’s a projection in a weird way. When I was doing street photography and considering how to frame things, the subject matter I was concentrated on was people of African descent performing or posing. In this way, the job site for me became a performance piece of a craft. I don’t pretend to be working class anymore but I respect it and appreciate it.

—Kevin Jerome Everson1

Kevin Jerome Everson’s work represents a distinct processing of materials, craft, and blackness.

Having worked in various mediums (e.g., photography, printmaking, sculpture, painting) for over twenty years, Everson has shifted significantly since the late 1990s to primarily film and video. His growing catalog of film and video work includes over one hundred shorts and six feature films. This work has shown at film festivals, museums, galleries, and other exhibition sites throughout Europe and America. Everson’s film and video work deliberately defies easy categorical claims. It gives the impression of a scripted documentary that is mediated by experimental/avant-garde gestures and yet there is a refined insistence on the everyday, black people, history, and repetition. Everson’s film and video work always functions as a distinct invitation for contemplation, not simply a passive spectatorial practice of watching. His work never proffers anything resembling an essence or definitive answer. Instead, it demonstrates a devotion to quotidian occurrences and tasks. As Ed Halter notes:

Everson rejects the role of cultural explainer in his work, opting instead to place the burden of understanding on the audience and its own labor. In this way, he has carved a place for himself outside both the typical expectations of documentary and the conventions of representational fiction, attempting to work from the materials of the worlds he encounters to create something else.

This short essay focuses on Everson’s work by way of conversations we had over the years and offers a glimpse of an artist continuing to push his craft and grow. Furthermore, this piece speculates on how his work might be considered to engage with the exhibition’s query of How to Remain Human.

* * * * *

MICHAEL B. GILLESPIE: When did you first start making art or identify as an artist?

KEVIN JEROME EVERSON: I began when I was getting my BFA in Photography at the University of Akron. I continued growing as an artist while getting my MFA in Photography at Ohio University. I was doing a lot of street photography, people like Roy DeCarava, Robert Frank,
Garry Winogrand. But really I was always dealing with multiple media. I was doing sculpture, printmaking, and painting. I did some films in school but mostly for me it was all about the influence of my undergraduate teachers. They all came from Kent State, Ohio, and Iowa where it was all about material, process, and/or procedure. So for me, the work always has to project its material, process, and/or procedure. Even the film and video.

MBG: One of the ways I continue to identify with your work involves the way it defies the expectations of black art, experimental art, and the meeting between the two. Why do you primarily work with film and video? What does film and video do for you more so than sculpture, painting, or photography?

KJE: Well, I haven’t stopped working with multiple media. I finished my last large body of serious photography when I was in Rome at the American Academy back in 2001. Beyond the fact that I’ve been teaching film more, my move to working more with film and video has lot to do with the things I’m trying to say about gestures, tasks, and conditions. I’m interested in duration and time-based media works best for that.

MBG: How has Ohio informed your work?

KJE: I identify as someone from Northern Ohio. Unemployment, employment, migration from the South, language, weather, benchmarks, and basements. These are the keywords for my craft as I continue to try and get better as an artist. I’m drawn to what gestures might represent.

MBG: Do you still bristle at being called a black avant-garde or experimental artist?

KJE: I would still prefer to be called an artist. I’m still down for the everyday political and the every other day political.

MBG: People have to write dissertations, Kevin. You can’t be just an artist. On that note, why do you refuse to identify as a documentarian or want your work thought of as documentaries?

KJE: Because nothing is real in my work, everything is made up. My work documents artifice. I’m working on a project with a colleague who wants to do documentary. The first thing that I was thinking about was when to start auditioning actors.

MBG: We’ve spoken before about how you connect black intellectual practice with “being satisfied.” I’m thinking about the footage of your family in *Erie* (2010) discussing how working in the factory used to be about a certain kind of pleasure derived from a craft, but that eventually as management became less labor identified it became just work and finally, drudgery. How are your ideas of labor and being satisfied reflected in your work?

KJE: For me, being an artist is the practice of getting better. Art is not necessarily a job. I don’t just want to do my work well. I want to develop. I have a responsibility to my family, my hometown of Mansfield, close friends, and a history of former students to keep making that art. I’m not a doctor so I don’t heal, and I’m not a lawyer so I don’t advocate. I’m an artist, so I have to keep cranking out cultural artifacts. I tell my students I am an artist and a teacher, but mostly an artist. I want them to believe that. So, I prove it every day, week, month, season, and year. Art has to be made.

MBG: I looked back through the catalogue for the Black Male exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1994). I was thinking about your Mansfield, Ohio, End Table piece. I am very struck by the way in which Mansfield, Ohio inhabited that work and continues to inspire your art practice. In that same vein, I am also interested in what motivated you or attracted you to carry out this significant shift to the medium of film and video. Because in thinking about that piece, it seems to me that it does have a collateral relationship to what you are doing now in film and video. What are the photographs on the end table?

KJE: The photographs on top of the table were 1950s school photographs. And also there were pictures of prison guards. I had family and friends who worked in the
prison. My hometown of Mansfield used to be more of an industrial town, but now the penal institution is the main industry. My son’s mom, my uncle, and several cousins are all prison guards. The end table was basically done in the style of Dutch modernism with these two photographs placed on it. I really liked making those objects; I made probably twelve of them. But, what I really liked at that time was that someone would actually go to work, come home on Friday, get paid on Friday because everybody got paid weekly, and then they would go to Bing’s Furniture. It was one of the few furniture stores in my hometown and everybody had the same kind of furniture. Everybody had the same end tables. So the fact that they would go and pick out their end table with a different color or stain than that of their neighbor and bring it home and rearrange it interested me. What I liked more so than the sculpture was the time-based element, the performative aspect of a normal day. I was thinking of these performance pieces of people just arranging their furniture. My parents would arrange furniture seasonally and put up new pictures.

MBG: What this kind of furniture signifies is interesting. Your attention to details of craft raises the issues of class, labor, and materials. It touches on the broader question your work makes about the conception of labor in regards to the construction of the piece and the labor necessary to accumulate the capital to purchase it. The work demonstrates your driving concern for performativity and the laboring body.

KJE: I like that the body changes with labor. Coal miners have thick forearms. Truck drivers have potbellies. I am interested in those moments when the body shifts and changes. In Twenty Minutes (2005), you have the classical idea and form of the pulley then matched by the very same complexity of the performance of the men crafting a pulley to raise the engine out of the car.

MBG: I appreciate your investment in the art of blackness as not patronizing, in an ethnographic sense. There are few artists who address or enact blackness with the degree of rigor and ambiguity that you demonstrate. Could you speak to where you locate your work in the ongoing discussions of black representation? You have an investment in visual and expressive culture but without an inflection of universal humanism.

KJE: I was and remain interested in the craft. What motivates my approach to composition has much to do with the history of migration, the working class, and black performativity. I am a formalist. I want the presence of materiality. I look for ways that histories and formal properties can be understood as complexly performed. I consider my work to be art. When I was first showing Spicebush (2005) here in America I encountered this sense of how observation does not trump perception. Once they see black people they get freaked out and start needing something more familiar to them. That’s when I get questions about the absence of drugs. It says ‘art’ on my door. It says ‘art’ on my license plate. Yet, observation does not trump perception.

* * * * *

In Everson’s North (2007), an old black man (James Williams) struggles to refold a large map on a windy day. Comprised of two static shots, the man stands on a cliff with Lake Erie at his back. Unable to find a proper crease and fold to close the map, the high winds foil his task and turn his attempts comic and absurd. The film’s designation of ‘north’ evokes senses of movement and futility. Perhaps, an abstracted gesture to a history of black migration arrested and thwarted as this exacting attempt at folding reveals a gesture that neither succeeds nor fails. Rather, it remains a poignant observation of a struggling process of mapping and navigation.

The man appears again in Ninety-Three (2008), a short film comprised of a single slow-motion shot as he attempts to blow out ninety-three candles on a birthday cake. In this instance, the perfunctory ritual of blowing out the candles becomes meted by the elongation of time. This stretching demonstrates not the granting of a wish, but the cinematic measuring of time. In this way, the film captures more than a birthday
celebration. It documents contemplation and resignation, ceaselessness, aging, and a quiet joy and inevitability. In contradistinction to the blowing out of the birthday candles and the marking of maturation, Vanilla Cake with Strawberry Filling (2014) offers another cake and a marking of a life that has ended. The cake features the smiling pose of DeCarrio Antwan Everson, Kevin Everson’s son who died in 2010. The edible image is that of the joyful look of a young black man not for the occasion of a graduation or birthday, but a crossing over, a goodbye. The guests eat the cake not out of a “this is my body” sanctimoniousness, but as if to say he has left but he is honored by the vanilla cake with strawberry filling that remains. The film ends with the ritual closure of memorialization as the photo cake, now an icon, is carefully sculptured so that only the portion featuring DeCarrio remains. The careful packaging of the memorial cake completes one part of a process that cannot easily be thought to be closed.

Tygers (2014) is a perfect example of many of the core themes of Kevin Everson’s aesthetic practice: repetition, a devotion to form, and Northern Ohio sports. The film focuses on football practice for “The Tygers,” a high school football team in Mansfield Ohio. Everson positions himself and the camera on the field within cycling repetitions of the drills that cover passing patterns, coverage schemes, and handoffs. They are constitutive elements of a sport that, echoing the attempt to fold the map, does not guarantee success or failure but only the learning of form.

Fe26 (2014) illustrates Everson’s poignant disregard for any suggestion of documentary as an exercise in truth. The film is scripted verité set in East Cleveland and observes characters who are scrap scavengers who specialize in stripping abandoned homes of their valuable remains. But the script speculates on manhole covers as a prized possession. The film, like much of Everson’s work in general, pivots on the over-determinacy of a black image, the visual rendering of blackness. Coupled with the documentary conceit, East Cleveland might be thought to correspond to a black everyday, but in fact does not. The manhole cover shenanigans are artful forgery as Everson himself cast one of the manhole covers and a crowbar used in the film. Fe26 is avant-garde comedy about craft, genre, and the art of artifice; an abstraction of form rather than an exposé on the trickle down truths of black communities.

Set in Windsor, Ontario, there is a surveilling quality to Grand Finale (2015) resulting from Everson’s use of a telephoto lens and the lack of precise focalization cues. The handheld camera in the crowd at a distance displays two young black men from behind while they watch a fireworks show. The watching of the watchers accentuates their gestures and movement as they talk, record the event on their phone, and sporadically look away. The sight of the event itself is distended by the lens; it is a distorted flashing of blurred colors. In this way, the film is composed by the clustering of distinct and contingent quotidian gestures—the telephoto vantage, two young black men engaged in the perfunctory ritual of watching fireworks, and finally the distorted image of the pyrotechnics on the screen horizon. Yet, as Everson has noted, the scene is about an everyday black performativity: how two black subjects observe an event and inhabit a space. The two young black men are indeed the event on display or more precisely, the affective force that compels the film’s prosaic spatio-temporality. When the film has a slight cut to the grand finale of the pyrotechnics show, the exuberance of light and sound becomes matched by the cool teens breaking character as the sight of their emoting joy and awe rivals the spectacular grand finale in the sky. But, to have Everson tell it, if you thought the fireworks were the show, then you have missed the real show.

1. Kevin Jerome Everson
Grand Finale, 2015
Still from HD video, 00:04:41
Courtesy of the artist; Trilobite Arts-DAC; Picture Palace Pictures
Copyright Kevin Jerome Everson

2. Kevin Jerome Everson
Vanilla Cake with Strawberry Filling, 2014
Still from 16mm film, 00:01:50
Courtesy of the artist; Trilobite Arts-DAC; Picture Palace Pictures
Copyright Kevin Jerome Everson
Kevin Jerome Everson
Fe26, 2014
Still from 16mm film, 00:07:21
Courtesy of the artist; Trilobite
Arts-DAC; Picture Palace Pictures
Copyright Kevin Jerome Everson