

Some who may have an artist inside them aren't exposed to the education or the tools that might have made them into the kind of artist we recognize. But that doesn't mean the artist inside them goes away. And sometimes the artist inside finds another way out.

In these, rare cases, the materials, tools, techniques, and goals of art will be transposed into another key. Art will conform to the grammar of an unfamiliar context.

Joshua Van Schaick, Personal Trainer, Considered As an Artist

Athletics is your foundation. To a life spent playing games you prefer helping people ("It just feels better than scoring a touchdown."), so you leave behind competitive sports, study kinesiology, and become a personal trainer. In that role you learn to apply an athlete's skills to improving a client's physical conditioning. Your ability shines and your clientele swears by you yet you're frustrated: barbells and jump ropes don't offer much in the way of self-expression. Confident that you have more to give--your laid-back demeanor disguises intensity and drive--you search for some way to add dimension to the trainer's role.

Fitness, to you, encompasses mental and spiritual fitness. Shouldn't "training" similarly transcend mere mechanics, and engage the inner life? To the receptive client a trainer might offer not just improved muscle definition but improved self-definition—"the whole ball of wax," as you like to say. Having now identified the conceptual component of the personal trainer's role—his presence in the client's life—you proceed to explore its nuances with self-consciousness, sensitivity and care. In place of the stereotypical trainer's artificial, gung-ho "motivating" you offer another template of values: a holistic vision of how to achieve and maintain a balanced, satisfying life, derived from your close observation of and insights into the natural world. Now provided an outlet, your poetic side (it "comes in waves") progressively gains clarity and signal strength. The

plain-spoken poeticism with which you invest the trainer's role further distinguishes you from other, equally skilled and dedicated trainers.

The typical contemporary artist would make art *about* personal training. Joshua Van Schaick, a raw, intuitive yet self-assured take on beauty tempering his brawn, embodies a more profound integration: the personal trainer as artist. There is arguably "an art to" any well-executed work but Van Schaick performs at another level. Activating and consciously exploring training's potent subtext—the trainer's multi-dimensional role—he establishes coordinates that satisfy, however naively, some of the core criteria of conceptual art. Does it matter whether he, who lacks art education, has any inkling of conceptual art's tradition (in the early days of our friendship he wasn't sure about the definition of the term "medium")? Does it matter that he never addresses art per se? No. Van Schaick asks "what is 'personal training'?" then formulates a self-reflexive, open-ended model that incorporates a highly personal vision of life. Whether or not he views himself as an artist the effect of his achievement, which is to transfer the artist's ancient search for beauty and knowledge to a fresh theater, is the same.



Eschewing the virtual, Van Schaick's work is emphatically people-based—derived from interactions with people and delivered back to people. Consistent with his expanded notion of "training," his athletic aesthetic employs a complex interface.

The body is the clay. Van Schaick's work is rooted in comfort with and trust in the body. As an athlete his fit body has dependably delivered elemental, animal truths, insights, pleasures—his body has been a good friend. His

art thus naturally reflects a conviction, essentially erotic, that an ability to use the body to gather pleasurable experiences is key to a happy life. The body never lies; staying attuned to its animal truths can clear away the debris—the intellectualized, the neurotic—that clutters the overly-civilized mind. Van Schaick's art isn't mannerist, it's classical; simplicity is always sought and always preferred.¹ As he shapes his clients' physiques the personal-trainer-as-artist encourages an integration of body and mind. In so doing he helps advance them toward the harmony of a balanced self.

Discipline. Maintaining physical health through exercise requires self-discipline. To his clients the trainer thus symbolizes discipline. Van Schaick's understanding of this function goes deep. Abstracting from exercise what it takes to reach goals at the gym—performing all those push-ups and pull-downs gives the will a workout too—he identifies willpower's wider application. Discipline now is reward in itself. Self-control sufficiently developed will yield self-mastery. Self-mastery gets you the life you want—or at least improves your chances. The personal-trainer-as-artist's vision is, then, about far more than looking good and feeling fit. It's a vision with scale.

Energy. Van Schaick endeavors to channel the energy of the natural world. He strives to make himself a lens that focuses the client's natural energy. The personal-trainer-as-artist uses his presence in his clients' lives to help connect each of them to the unique energy attending their own identities—what makes them *them*.

Motivating from within. There are only so many exercises, to be combined in just so many ways, but the inner dimension is without limit. With an athlete's self-confidence the personal-trainer-as-artist encourages spiritual growth; helps to guide how his clients perceive and feel about themselves; builds the strength that's needed to explore life fully; listens closely to them so as

to determine how to best help them gain control over their lives—all with an eye to helping them identify and focus their own unique beauty. At all times, he *reinforces in them the beauty of life*. Van Schaick's one-to-one art is manifested not just in the changed shape of his clients' bodies but existentially. In this way the personal-trainer-as-artist adds to the world's beauty.

This is emphatically human stuff. Does the term "training" accurately describe the medium of *lives, interacting*? I suggest not. Just because we may lack a name for Van Schaick's medium, however, doesn't mean he hasn't one.



Let's not overstate anyone's selflessness. An artist's self-absorption and an artist's ego (or is it an athlete's?) are alive in this man. (Decreeing yourself "spiritually and mentally fit," enough to lead others toward that condition, is hardly humility.) Driven by a vision of beautiful form as demanding as a sculptor's, Van Schaick continually searches for the way that *he* does things. As can be said of every good artist, his own response to life is his chief text. However dedicated he may be to his clients' growth, his interactions with them also offer a way to explore *himself*.

Here as well, his method is personal. Van Schaick keeps his exploration unusually organic and pure. "To know life you've got to immerse yourself in life," he insists, and knowledge of life, here, is best acquired through contact with people, not from books.² Led by a comfort with and enthusiasm for human beings (perhaps expected in someone raised in a large family; Van Schaick has five siblings), the personal-trainer-as-artist listens and learns. His over-arching goal, for himself as for his clients, is to mirror nature's condition of continuous growth.

Might the artist be sometimes, like contemporary art itself, in the eye of the beholder? Is Joshua Van Schaick, personal trainer, truly a kind of artist? His won't be the artist's typical story of galleries, museums, and collectors, certainly. The conceptual frontier treaded by the personal-trainer-as-artist won't be acknowledged by any institution—indeed by anyone other than those lucky enough to be his clients. But no matter: some people are artists at life. Van Schaick's vision is his own, hard-won, the real thing, and it's leading him forward into an original life, one whose beauty will be, in the end, unique. In the process of pursuing it he'll have carried out the artist's true work, which is, today as ever, to expand the set of human possibilities and to embody that expansion in life-loving actions.

David Robbins

- 1 Such continual emphasis on simplicity might be considered too reductive, given that complexity is sometimes the overriding truth of human experience. But an aesthetic is an aesthetic.
- 2 His heart may be in the right place here but Van Schaick's purity is problematic since it supposes that the student is drawing his teachers from a broad-minded sector of humanity. It's an idealization—and a dangerous one: the student who is taught by primitives risks adopting primitives' views himself. Books are valuable precisely *because* they bring us into contact with ideas and agents that transcend the limitations of our personal circumstances. Books offer an alternative to insufficiently evolved environments.

All quotes from JVS in conversation with DR.

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JOSHUA Van Schaick, PERSONAL TRAINER, considered as an ARTIST

