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## **Tables dancing: playing with enchantments of materiality beyond representation**

Ivinson, G. and Sackville-Ford, M

This article is written in response to Method Lab #2, reacting to and reading scenes from the theatre and the school classroom. In two pieces that we respond to, 'The table and the dancer' by Carla Maier with drawings by Joanna Wieland, and 'The book and the authors reading' by Elise von Bernstorff and Carla Maier, their texts vibrate and resonate with us. As our colleagues showed us video footage, shared texts and drawings from their project, we found ourselves moved by and with intensities and forces affecting ourselves and those that had affected the authors. Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's words, that thought comes to us through intensity in 'an encounter, a conjunction' (1994: 93) we asked ourselves how we could create something more with these intensities. We shall respond by creating post-qualitative speculations by engaging further with the materiality of the scenes and wonder with the forces and entanglements of bodies and matter. We move beyond representational thinking to explore the 'vibrant matter' (Bennett, 2010) and 'vitalist materialism' (Braidotti, 2013) that emerged and changed as dancer, actors, microphones, video projections and sounds created multiple socio-material assemblages. In the diffractive readings that follow, we open up new possibilities to think and move with their writing. We experiment with 'what more' the text, scenes and pictures can 'become'.

Just as new methodological approaches dislodge the human subject as the centre of knowing, so Erin Manning (2009, 2013) dislodges the human subject as the centre of movement. As the princess figure dances atop the wooden table, and the student refugee claims his place atop the school desk, what comes into view for the theatre audience and for us? The material presence of the table has already enacted multiple potential cuts on and in the theatre and the classroom. Bodies and objects do not cut an already existing space; they create spaces through movement. The emphasis on process calls forth the 'ontological turn' (Maggie Maclure 2015) including 'new empiricism', 'posthuman studies', 'material feminism', 'new materialism', 'process philosophy', 'actor network theory' recognised in the works of, for example, Gilbert Simondon (2017), Gilles Deleuze (e.g. 1990), Felix Guattari and Deleuze (e.g. 1987), Karen Barad (2007), Brian Massumi (2002), Rosi Braidotti (2013), Bruno Latour (2004) and Jane Bennett (2010). In diverse ways these writers

resist the notion of space as merely the backdrop to human activity and instead point to processes of complex and shifting, intra-acting assemblages made up of all manner of matter such as nature, bodies, discourse, sounds, spaces, surfaces and more.

The princess and student interactively create and recreate a multiplicity of milieu as they dance and move with the table. By emphasising the processes of bodies and space in time and motion, we signal the tentativeness of body-table-movement assemblages, as constantly becoming with procedural architectures (Manning, 2016: 94) that keep events open to 'spaciating potential' (*ibid.* 95). So, as we watch the princess dancing, we cannot ignore the rest of the play that has brought the robber refugees to the house in the wilderness where the table is located. As she moves, nothing settles down, meanings shift, the confusion intensifies. The table is already more than; more than the physical materiality of wood, surface and legs.

### **Dancer, Table, Music**

Carla Maier is drawn to the table and the dancer from the research data and describes the scene as 'vibrant and productive'. Something here shimmers (Bennett, 2010), something 'glows' (Maclure, 2010) drawing us towards the scene. Maier's reading is drawn particularly to the sonic rationalities that enliven the dancer's movement rhythms and discordances. We turn towards the materiality of the table as another element within these moving assemblages, to pay attention to co-constituting vibrancy.

The dancer is not separate from the table in our diffractive reading. Energies such as the forces of gravity, the potential to fall, the height of the table above the ground, the springiness of the wood surface, align, interfere and affect the dancer's moving body. The table is 'more than' it exceeds the potentialities of wood, nails, glue and height and becomes a dynamic actor in the dance of forces and countering resistances to the potentialities of her balance, muscle torsion, steps and stretches. It holds and restrains the dancer, pushing her into an elevated position. The jerky repertoire of movements through the body of the dancer flow through the surface of the illuminated wooden table. The vibrating notes from the stringed instruments propel the movements onwards. Her body slows and speeds-up. The silk bodice constrains the body of the dancer as the hands take

flight, tracing lines through the air. Agency emerges in-between bodies in mutual engagements and relations. Muscles life the arms and legs of the dancer, which meet resistance against the table, the table pulling them back to the surface as they dance with gravity. All react to the sonic qualities of the music, which invisibly move with and against the beat. Within this event there are varying intensities, forces and speeds and table and dancer interact and fold around each other. The dancer becomes table; table becomes with dancer (Deleuze, 1990). Within the immanence of the scene, the dancer is not more significant than the table. Non-human and human emerge as part of their entangled intra-actions with everything else (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). The ordinary affects of the scene include surges and jumps which:

....happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in publics and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like *something* (Stewart, 2007: 1-2)

The scene is filled with ‘vibratory motion’, with resonance. A quivering in the stability ‘gives the ordinary the charge of an unfolding’ (Stewart, 2007: 19). The theatre scene continues to unfold.

Who or what is dancing? Deleuze suggests identity is an effect of events and so takes place only at surface level. ‘In the *event* the subject can no longer be understood as a fixed being, but rather a ‘way of being’ – a verb rather than a noun’ (Hultman and Taguchi, 2010: 532). This ‘undoing’ should not mean that we cast aside the subject completely. As Guattari suggests:

[this] is not a question of anti-humanism, but a question for whether subjectivity is produced solely by internal faculties of the soul, interpersonal relations, and intra-familial complexes or whether nonhuman machines, such as social, cultural, environmental, or technological assemblages enter into the very production of subjectivity itself (Guattari, cited in Philip Goodchild, 1996: 151).

In moving beyond the individual to the event, we meet affects that well up as art takes us to the limits of what can be understood. We encounter slippages within Maier's text as she tells us, for example, 'I am deeply affected by...'. She grapples for meanings as she uses terms such as 'proud and vulnerable' to interpret the dancer's movements. Affective readings can exist in different modalities and Anderson (2006) points to a sense of 'feeling' noticed through bodily responses. Naming affects as emotions such as 'proud' organise events into feelings and narratives. When writing affectively it is easy to focus on the 'emotional mode,' yet a commitment to thinking on the plane of immanence means that there is a need to stay within the pre-personal, becoming-state. Whilst all modes attempt to capture the complexity and dynamism of the scene, staying with this complexity, that which cannot be known, such a pre-conscious affective reading offers something new if we can achieve this. We too found ourselves slipping between the desire to make meaning and our affective pre-conscious engagements, as will be evident in the following section.

### **Uncertainty? What does the table do?**

As Maier tells us, "Ina Sladic performs the role of a princess, with her white dress, pale skin and long, tucked-up hair she reminds us all of classic fairy tales such as Cinderella. She bursts into the middle of the scenery and behaves like a princess, who strives to rule." The princess has forgotten who she is. Can she dance herself into being?

The melody of the violin features a piece of Syrian heritage music, and the dancer responds to these notes in a turning of her ankles, that could, for a moment, be frozen in the image of an oriental dancer. But it doesn't. The movements are edgy, full of fractures, the dancer's body straightens and bends again, the table acts as a counterweight, which pushes her upright again. The dancer repels herself from the table, and the table repels the dancer. The table becomes an actor, creating and recreating entanglements of pride, vulnerability, questioning who and what has power. Eventually she collapses.

We pick up the story here. What collapses... power, certainty, identity, being, Croatian dancer Ina Sladic, time, freedom?

Which way will the lost princess go? Paying attention to materiality, we see the bodice constraining her torso setting limits on the possibilities of movement. The tight, restricting, inflexible material contains, constrains and clamps; forcing free movement outward into the spaces above and below the bodice tube, striating the torso into segments of stiffness and distortion. Fluid movements become increasingly frenzied as she dances with the quickening music while being restricted by the small rectangle of space perched precariously above the ground. Flesh is squeezed, reminiscent of the tight clothing of upper-class women, who were sculpted into shapes required by the bourgeois patriarchal gaze; the state controlling the female figure via the costumes of the day. Yet, the gypsy rhythms, ankles turned inward brings the clash between high and low culture, rich and poor, the lost and secure into disharmony as the lofty princess and the lower-class robbers come into stark relief and contradiction. The ever-gyrating movements hint at working class laboring bodies, while being squeezed into the inflexible shape of the bodice required for the docile feminine comportment of princesses. But the corset and the table-top are forcing this princess into becoming 'out of step' into ever more hazardous gyrations. Table-top, bodice, music assembles open her to a fuller liveliness that would have been legitimated for women in those times, contorting freedom into increasingly crazed movements. The constricting space on top of the table creates a potential for toppling over and falling to the floor... all of the time. Yet musical time dances to a different beat, and take us to other times. Time is multiply layered and multiply stretched. As Manning suggests:

A dancing body...learns to stretch out the force of duration, to express incipience, making palpable the force of form that is movement's procedural intensity'  
(Manning 2013, 39)

It is as if she takes into her body all the force-movement vectors of time and space on the stage. She seems to turn with multiples of place, the forest, the robbers' place, the music's place-making Syria, and the place created by audiences' eyes. Our eyes are drawn to her extraordinary movements as if sucked into her body are all the forces; the force of the table's debilitating space, the continued potential to fall off, the constrains of the bodice, the frenzied bowing of the violins. As her body opens up to the multiplicities of forces, it becomes ever more frenzied. Swirling arms, swooping gestures, arms flailing in the air, becoming freer and freer, yet edging to avoid falling off the table. Freedom of movement

opens and expands until it reaches a limit; a body that can take no more. Movement hits total breakdown, a total undoing of individuation. The female form is overwhelmed, exhausted and collapse into madness or into an over exuberant force to live, edging the princess towards madness

Play on the edge, taking an idea to the limit, has been enacted as physical movement that registered in us humans as conceptual movement. For Freud, femininity was always on the edges of madness. Yet, as she has demonstrated edging can go both ways, to freedom and to destruction. Is the epitome of femininity an edge which hints of madness? What has happened? Is authority spent? Which way will or can the robbers go now?

Deleuze and Guattari, (1984) release desire from the Freudian lack, and reinstall it as a life-giving force. The desire to survive can be imagined as the desire to spread outwards, to occupy the world, to whirl, gyrate and move in ever more expansive forms. Yet, Deleuze and Guattari also stress the dangers of expansion and freedom. While freer movements might rupture social codes and constraining norms such as those of patriarchy or femininity, what else happens? 'Whenever a multiplicity is taken up in a structure, its growth is offset by a reduction in its laws of combination' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 4). It still tends to come back to unity. This limiting edge to horizontal proliferation is Nietzsche's cycle unity of the eternal return.

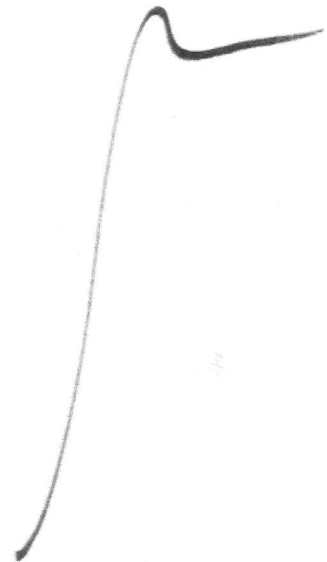
Intoxication, collapse, destruction, a dissolution? In the end the table has won, it has claimed its victim. Perching her on high, it has sucked out all her power to dance. She is flattened and becomes inert while we gaze and gaze at the now empty table-top where the affective trace of movement moving lingers, like a line left in a cloud dust. What remains is the rest...the stillness...the non-movement. The breath finally squeezed out...the bodice has also won. The bodice has been a bodying that has taken the movement as far as it can go...to its limit.

### **Evoking the scene**

Deleuze suggests that all bodies have proper qualities, actions, passions and souls. In terms of representation, it is clear that he thinks of this as an actual body itself, in this case the

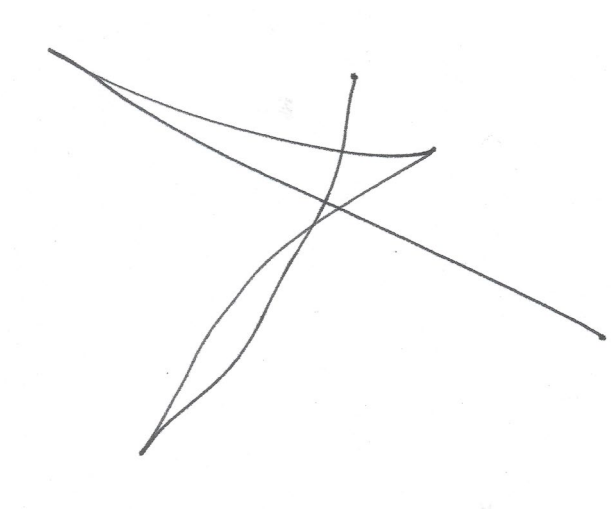
dancer, the table and the music. But the power lies in not trying to represent the body, even when there are grounds to make the distinction between incorporeal expression (the affective dance) and the corporeal quality (the narrow table). Rather than represent things he suggests that we 'anticipate them or move them back, slow them down or speed them up, separate or combine them, delimit them in a different way' (Deleuze, 1990: 101). There is a movement between the elements of the assemblage moving at 'differing speeds.' Joanna Wieland's pencil drawings tend to accentuate still images of the scene, perhaps heightening representation. These drawings have the power to show the reader what was seen, but is there something more, can we open up rather than close down meanings?

Ingold draws this 'Salmon drawing' line to demonstrate the fish jumping upstream that he had witnessed in a Scottish river (Ingold, 2011). Rather than draw the fish, he attempts to show something more vibrant through capturing it's movement. He suggests, 'to be sure, if you merely look *at* it, there is nothing much to see. You have rather to look *with* it: to re-live the movement that, in turn, described the vault of my own observation as I watched the salmon leap the falls. In this line, movement, observation and description become one. And this unity, I contend, is nothing less than that of life itself' (Ingold, 2011; 1). Through drawing a simple line we can invigorate the objects of research, reminding us of their intensities, movements and vitality.



Pausing to think with the text, we wonder how we might move towards Ingold's lines in evoking the vibrancy of the dance-table-music assemblage. Representational drawings seem to close things down by excluding the movement. In experimental writing, could a 'dancing line' allow us to look '*with*' the dance and invigorate the atmospherics? We agree that something has snapped into place within this assemblage-scene. In resisting notions of representation Stewart (2011: 445) suggests that 'things matter not because of how they are represented but because they have qualities, rhythms, forces, relations and movements' This reminds us that writing in creativity and experimental ways we are doing research that

permits a sense of co-producing with matters and forces, attending to the 'atmospherics' to generate writing that is itself evocative.



Would such a line drawing allow use to think *with* the flow of lines produced by the movement of the dancer arm? Maybe the thickness of line, the rapid changes of direction, the jerky, uncertain line allows a more active reading of the dance. No longer do we see the actual dancer, but instead note the abstraction that exists in the virtual realm.

### **'Dancer'**

Papers that play with the visual, textural and physical forms and ideas offer a deliberate attempt to avoid the arborescent tree 'image of thought' and attempt a rhizomatic approach, moving along the *multiplicities* of random nodes. Experimentation is a deliberate and purposeful methodological approach borne from a commitment to pushing thinking and theorising further. There will inevitably be highs and lows in terms of experimentation; successes and failures. At times the production of knowledge '...might emerge as a creation out of chaos' (Grosz, 2008). This judgement of failure is a complex one and the tension within new materialism for who (or what) makes this judgment continually asserts itself. Even Deleuze acknowledges this: 'according to Deleuze's doctrine of chance-driven selection, there will be successes but also failures in his attempt to dramatize concepts, as well as to define and justify them' (Williams, 2003: 85).

### **Table, Student, Book**

In the classroom writing (von Bernstorff and Maier) a table again has significance in the assemblage. The air is charged with static as the transgressive act of sitting on the table takes place. The table elevates Faris, like a stage, as he holds court over the bodies in the classroom. Intensities emerge as his peers become unsure about how to respond to the situation. Energies flow through Faris as he shifts his weight and swings his legs, the table

pushing against him, willing him on. The yellow book slows down his quivering hands, holding them in place. The thing-power of the book announces Faris's differences as a migrant in Germany, its agency announces his ethnicity to the room.

Deleuzian concepts of the virtual and actual, referred to already in this paper, are useful tools. An object-body has within an event, both actual and virtual qualities. The actual can be the object itself, such as the book or table or Faris in the examples above. The virtual describes the sensations felt through the intensities of pure becomings. Williams (2003: 7) uses a coconut to explain: an actual coconut as well as the common intensities of the virtual ('to become hard, to become grainy, to become hairy, to quench to nourish'). Rather than being two separate realms these should be considered as two sides of the same coin. By resisting the world as fixed, tuning in to the virtual helps us to resist representation, and see the reality of things that are not actual or nameable. Within the table-student-book assemblage there are intensities that exceed the actual. As Williams states (2003: 8) 'they cannot belong to that realm because, if they were identifiable – that is, measureable and comparable – then sensation and significance would be secondary to external structures of measurement and value'. Enchantment is a phrase used by Bennett (2001) to think about how the virtual may move our research into more ecstatic states:

Enchantment consists of a mixed bodily state of joy and disturbance, a transitory sensuous condition dense and intense enough to stop you in your tracks and toss you onto new terrain and to move you from the actual world to its virtual possibilities (Bennett, 2001: 111).

The virtualities in these assemblages are significant. The virtual table announces Faris and narrows the scene down. Its agency and invitation to be sat upon focuses the gaze. It unfolds with gravity and forces to move the body of the boy. One can see an actual table but the virtual table, active in our imaginations, opens up new possibilities of materialism. It nourishes Faris and gives him the confidence to be openly Egyptian and Muslim. The virtual book also connects in this assemblage. It is haunted by migration stories from the past, which Faris both moves with and resists. He mirrors the body of the teacher to show a virtual embodiment of power, status and whiteness. Yet he rides along Arabic songs and traditions to entice his students. Moving with the scene and tuning into the virtual is only

ever partial. The assemblage shifts, the atmospherics constantly change with things always evading us. In Barad's words (2014: 178) 'That which is determinate (e.g. intelligence) is materially haunted by – infused with – that which is constitutively excluded (remains indeterminate, e.g. unintelligible). In/determinancy is an always already opening up-to-come. In/determinancy is the surprise, the interruption, by the stranger (within) re-turning unannounced'. As Williams (2003: 121-122) puts it, 'when we mistakenly think we have sensed something that we cannot sense, we have not sensed that thing but merely suffered an illusion or made a mistake'. This is one of the challenges for the authors whose work we respond to and for ourselves as researchers committed to materially-informed research.

### **From Analysis to Diffraction**

The spirit of new materialisms moves us away from notions associated with what St Pierre (2014) calls the 'conventional qualitative research,' such as 'analysis.' A diffractive reading of the event (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 1997) instead leads to different ways of seeing and becoming with the data. Barad writes that, 'diffraction has to do with the way waves combine when they *overlap* and the apparent bending and spreading of waves that occur when waves encounter an obstruction' (Barad, 2007: 74). It is this movement of overlapping where the waves *change in themselves* in intra-action with the obstacle of the stone, and with each wave accumulating, which signifies diffraction. In other words, diffraction effects are effects of *interferences*, where the original wave partly remains with the new wave after its transformation into a new one, and so on, wave after wave (Barad, 2007: 71-83).

Thus when reading diffractively, seeing *with* data, the significance of *events* of activities and encounters, lead to evocative transformations and change within the performative agents involved. These include the table-dancer-music and table-book-student assemblages already explored above. In diffracting these, we find highly dynamic shifting intensities that resist a fixed identity or causal relationships. Barad's ideas help to show how the intra-actions of the matter and the atmospherics lead to transformations. The bodies overlap and envelop one another, leading to new bodies, albeit ones that are infused with what remains from before the intra-action. Each body is therefore in a constant state of *becoming anew*.

It becomes a distributed network of assemblages of matter, organisms and meaning taking place in the encounter, rather than being about recognition, representation or everyday common sense (Colebrook, 2002). Diffraction as an act of 'seeing' and 'reading' the data as an *other* event, so that what was data becoming yet another emergence. Data therefore becomes a playful and eventful encounter rather than something that desires a proper reading. Diffraction then takes thinking in relation to Method Lab #2 a step further; as yet another performative encounter that creates new assemblages, whilst the diffraction of the data also becomes an event.

This leads to an event of becoming with the material artefact of the writing allowing the reader to engage in the diffractive act of 'seeing' and 'reading' anew. So, we have written our responses to the two texts in a way that might allow the reader to become part of the encounter and as such, potentially, create something new again. With Deleuze (1990) this is the effect of being *affected*, when *thinking* exceeds us as subjects. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) recognize this affective force being affected by itself and influencing the subject and thinking, which then lead to transformation and transcendence. They extend this to include all matter not just that which is subject or capable of rational thought, but all.

Through the process of producing 'creative stammerings', Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 98) demonstrate a desire to open up spaces within the research assemblage; a collage of materiality and events that makes up the Method Lab #2. Within these spaces we might produce an open, connectable map that shifts and reverses, rather than a fixed map of theatre and schools. 'It can be drawn on a wall, conceived as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 12). These maps do not recreate knowledge but rather perform and create new knowledge. This is the fertile 'research-creation' or 'radical empiricism' acknowledged by Manning (2016) that moves with the minor gesture rather than the major alignment of method. What therefore emerges with this minor gesture 'will never be an answer. What emerges will be patient experimentation...another mode of encounter, another opening onto the political as site as yet defined' (*ibid*: 13).

### **Openings, gropings and endings**

With the new tentative of body-table-movement assemblages created in our responses, we push further at the potential of procedural architectures (Manning, 2016: 94) that keep events open. Accordingly, we have no answer to questions such as what has collapsed, or which way will the robbers or migrants in general, go next? Instead what we try to do, is bring a new attentiveness to the forces that create real material conditions of gravity, balancing, dancing, reading and so of migratory movements around a globe already contoured by capitalist flows. By shifting the focus from just bodies, to bodies-and-forces, we try to bring the potentiality of the immanent, the virtual that haunts the real, into view even if only as intangible, un-representational affects. Yet, it is in the sensorial potential of affects that hope lies; hope that things can be different.

Here we refer to *pure differences* or ontological difference that exist on an immanent 'transcendental field' (Deleuze, 1990: 98). Deleuze and Guattari, calling this field variously, 'the plane of immanence, plane of consistency, pure difference, body without organs, abstract machine and so on' (St Pierre, 2012: 119). This plane of immanence is therefore a pre-individual, pre-conscious, pre-conceptual, formless, depthless thing. We focus on these affective *pre-states*:

Precisely because the plane of immanence is pre-philosophical and does not immediately take effect with concepts, it implies a sort of groping experimentation and its layout resorts to measures that are not very respectable, rational, or reasonable. These measures belong to the order of dream, of pathological processes, esoteric experiences, drunkenness, and excess. We head for the horizon, on the plane of immanence, and we return with bloodshot eyes, yet they are the eyes of the mind (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994: 41).

Our groping experimentation is a response to Method Lab #2. In thinking about opening up matter within assemblages, Coole and Frost (2010) describe a paradox that emerges in what they call the 'void'. There is a risk that the void naturally gets filled with immaterial things: 'language, consciousness, subjectivity, agency, mind, soul...imagination, emotions, values, meaning and so on' (Coole and Frost, 2010: 2). Resisting representation is difficult because we are pulled towards 'stratification' (St Pierre, 2012) where things are captured, normalised and made ordinary. It is a constant struggle and one that emerges in the papers

we respond to. Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 13) describe strata as 'Layers, Belts. They consist of giving form to matters, of imprisoning intensities or locking singularities into systems of resonance and redundancy'. That is, the intensities become pinned down and sedimented into place, which prevents them from opening up new ways of being and thinking. To research with new materialisms and tune into the event requires a commitment that is draining and difficult. Through tuning into to the intensities, ideas become reconfigured, leading to both clarity and obscurity within pure differences. In our response we play with these, to 'blow apart strata, cut rocks, and make new connections' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987:15). We acknowledge that simultaneously the readings may produce clarity and obscurity.

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