

THE TABLE IS THE FLOOR

Richard Layzell

INTRODUCTION This performance/lecture was presented on 12th February 2014 at the first of the series of three Substrate symposiums held in the Green Room at Chelsea College of Arts.

KEY WORDS

PERFORMANCE

ACME GALLERY

VIDEO

ARTIST WRITING

This is a narrative. It traces a line or a plane in a certain way... for today. One line may be as good as another and the main point is that this is the only one that matters right now on this floor under these lights.

The questioning of the surface, the base, the template, the ground, goes through the paper to the desk underneath. You sit at the desk. You sit.

Sitting is the obvious position. At the desk that you made in the Slade's wood-work shop using the electric bandsaw. The desk is modular, four sides of an open cube. So you're already slightly subsumed by a sculptural form in the constructivist tradition.

The top support surface is a square of half inch blockboard not screwed down, so it can lift off, slide off at any time and become part of a work or works. You sit here in Willow Street EC1, behind the awkward Old Street monument, and make drawings, taking paper slowly from a pile of cast-offs from a friend's printing works. The individual sheets feel fine, firm with a slight sheen, gently secure and 'other'. But decades later they emit oily deposits while the occasional cartridge paper you reluctantly used stands firm. It's in process. And you're in process.

You fall asleep at the desk most days. You don't understand this but you grow to accept it and rationalise it as an anti-dote to the three days a week you spend trying to control teenagers at Woodberry Down Comprehensive School in Hackney, where the head of art is a former policeman ('Respect, Mr Palmer, discipline, man...') and a self taught draughtsman of innocuous figurative poster paint compositions that the kids admire hugely, 'can you do mine, Mr Palmer, cor, look Mr Palmer done that bit for me'.

He grows geraniums in small pots in the store cupboard. Their acrid smell surprises you when you open the door and fumble for materials, recalling with a shudder your life as an art student 18 months earlier in an art school where you were obsessed with breaking boundaries between video, drawing, sculpture and photography. And your MA graduation work is hovering there as you sit at your desk producing the drawings, drawings which are in part randomly generated, resembling early computer generated art. You are your own machine.

And the shift comes when the job shifts and the housing shifts. You're allocated an Acme House in Bow, a derelict terraced house opposite the gas works where the upstairs eventually becomes a studio. Then, supported by documentation of your MA show, you're given your first solo show at the Acme Gallery and when your exhibition's on they need invigilators so you start working there as well. You call it *Breaking Down*¹ and the drawings find a place, this time on larger cartridge paper. These are the survivors. You continue working at the gallery and your interest in performance takes a new turn as you sample the scene. So at 2B Butlers Wharf, a new performance venue, your drawings are revisited, projected in negative onto a rough wooden structure that is also derived from them. You call it *Line Flying*². And you're live-ness in the work, your physicality, empowers you unexpectedly. You're not falling asleep at the table desk any more (Fig 16).

A couple of years later, an opportunity arises to slide off the table and onto the floor, the parallel underfoot surface. You take the train to Carlisle. That's where the floor is. Its parquet and the black bitumen adhesive impeccably designed to hold firm is now cracking underneath in brittle fragments. The impacted, accumulated dust lies heavy in the crevices and gaps between the thick rectangular blocks. See what you find if you look underneath, or better not, get someone else to do it. Get the workmen in. The ones who are used to the job, so hardened and toughened they refuse to wear facemasks for fear of being tarred with effeminacy. Breathing in dust and shit makes a man of me. It's already giving way in places, that's why it needs replacing, especially as this

is now a low budget media studio, home to unwieldy former television cameras that frequently need to glide on tripod wheels for smooth shots. Where the surface is broken, the wheels jump, the camera judders and the picture shakes. This floor has to go. Or is it a floor? It's an ecosystem, a memory bank, a reservoir of human impact: stand on it, lie on it, rely on it, wipe it, smell it, ignore it. Having outlived so many of its users and resurfacings, there is an implicit revenge contained in its impasse. They call it refurbishment. You gradually draw it into submission and disintegration, ripe for your particular camera and action.

You lift a single loose wooden brick block. It emerges easily at one end, inclined at an angle, resting its underside on the top edge of its neighbour in lip contact. It's that easy. The raised block casts a sharp, prismatic shadow under the strong lights. It reveals a presence, a persona, and the floor is now a space of potential. Lift one you can lift more. The floor is in take-off and no longer a bland underfoot surface. It is what it always was, an assemblage of oak slabs clustered together for support and adhesion. Separate one from the crowd and they all want to follow (Fig. 17).

You progressively find yourself using the studio less. You generate ideas in transit, on trains, in cafes, in pubs, through video editing, through writing.

The table becomes a space, a support for the book, a resting place. You start to think of the anonymous table, with its intrinsic horizontal support, as a meta-physical space. Its inexplicable value goes beyond itself. The triangular relationship of brain/mind, pen/pencil and paper/book is nothing without the table. You look for it. You rest on it. You notice it. You greet it. You meet it. You rely on it.

1. *Breaking Down* - Finding New Paths (1977). London: Acme Gallery 29 July – 17 August.

2. *Line Flying* (1978). London: 2B Butlers Wharf.

The table rests in your consciousness as a domain of absorption and exchange, while concomitantly, exchange becomes an intrinsic part of your practice. And for a site-specific commission in Norway you actively select a park café *The Park Caffein* as your location for interaction, developing a work of social engagement (relational even) where your work hovers between performer/worker/waiter (English speaking and popular with a surprising number of regulars) and installation artist³. The table is the surface of subtlety and action, whiteness and darkness, the container and holder of cloth, dialogue, plate, glass, action and fly. This experience marks the start of a new relationship with the table, from plane of support to plane of action, invention and intervention.

When you start to investigate your process with a renewed seriousness, a methodology of self-questioning begins to surface as a conceptual mirror and out of this you start to formalise and objectify this relationship by Talking to Tania, a fictional artist who represents a slice of your psyche, in an emerging dialogic process inspired by Bakhtin, Dostoyevsky and Ivy Compton-Burnett, or a muse⁴. Tania's responses are fluid and distinct. She is opinionated and vigorous with plenty to say, sometimes uncomfortably confrontational. Your dialogues evolve into a web published global exchange that takes place in Greece, Bangkok, Barcelona, New York, Penzance and London⁵.

As this relationship unfolds Tania's voice becomes stronger and more demanding. You're gradually being probed, sanded down and unpicked by a being and an inquisitive presence you yourself invented,

perhaps for this purpose, but not with these anticipated outcomes. You feel exposed and defensive and it doesn't make sense. Is it getting out of control or do you trust in the process and the voice? Yet you're hooked, fascinated to see where it will go and you decide to stay with it. One of your increasingly collaborative foci, along with *White on White*, the *Radiant Curve* and the *Stumbling Block* is the *Table as Metaphorical Space*. These are lingering concepts from the notebook that have not been developed and you welcome Tania's insistence and persistence to make something of them.

When you finally acknowledge that a manifestation of your collaborative process is inevitable, in the form of a gallery-based installation, you begin conversations with curators across a table, meetings in which Tania is included through her aesthetic of absence, and represented by a place setting and an object of her choice.

At the end of each meeting you leave a copy of your now newly published dialogues in book form, *Cream Pages*.

The site-specific installation entitled *The Manifestation* is becoming a reality and tours the UK. It's jointly authored, presented as a collaboration, and each showing is taken from a different range of thematic clusters. The Glasgow showing contains *The Stumbling Block* (Fig. 18), *Falling Phoebe* and *The Dialogue* (Fig. 19). The London showing also includes *The Radiant Curve* and *The Table as Metaphorical Space*. They are all referenced in *The Dialogue*, which is documented from a live dialogue about each show and presented as a core element in the work. The text, the word, is enough and elevated to a deserving status.

5. Sofaer, J. (2008) *Cream Pages: The dialogues of Tania Koswycz and Richard Layzell*, London: ResCen Publications

6. *The Manifestation* (2008) London: Café Gallery Projects and then to Glasgow, Stroud and Colchester

The Table as Metaphorical Space takes form as a group of 12 tables with an unexpected aesthetic of absence, as if in cahoots with Tania (Fig 20).

Tania suggests you look again at the video material from the Norway project, envisaging that this could be integrated into The Manifestation in London. She insists on re-editing the material alongside you and to your surprise it holds up and finds a place as a video projection. You call it The Table (Fig. 21).

So the table is now acknowledged in your practice as a holder of potential, a reference for the ground of standing on, drawing upon, moving across, gesturing through, dialoguing, shaping up, keeping distance, sloping off, scaling down, fantasising, a universal cultural icon of support and civilisation or inappropriate behaviour, [stands on table] (Fig. 22) get off the table, get on the table, no, get down, off, stop it, behave yourself....

i. Talking to Tania, October 2003 www.rescen.net/Richard_Layzell/TalkingToTania/tttintro.html#. VNEEKmisV8E

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Richard Layzell's extended residency in industry as a 'visionaire' led to the invention and profiling of Olaf Gunderssen and ultimately the Gunderssen Building, alongside several other interventions into corporate culture. His subsequent collaboration with the equally fictional Tania Koswycz developed, through her early appearances in Colchester and Wagga Wagga, into the Talking to Tania dialogues. Their work together took physical form as The Manifestation, a dialogic installation, which toured the UK in 2008-9.

His Square Mile residency in Shanghai, hosted by the elusive Shanghai E Arts, spawned a series of interventions and an ongoing performance/lecture The River Flows, shown in Glasgow, London and the Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai. His recent work includes Dataography at the Knowle West Media Centre Bristol, the promotion and profiling of Pivotal Dave for Key Notes and Glory, a major installation for the Commonwealth Games at the Tramway in Glasgow in 2014.

He is the author of Cream Pages and Enhanced Performance, is an honorary associate of the NRLA and Pathway Leader for Print and Time Based Media at Wimbledon College of Arts.