

### *Rehearsals for A Public Table*

Five Years, Thurs - Sat, 27-29 July + 3-5 August, 2023, 11-18:00; PV 5 August 19-21:00



Shall we proclaim a *public table* for each neighbourhood? Shall every household promise to safeguard a part of this table and declare that, when called upon, we will all gather the pieces and assemble the table in the place we have chosen for our shared thinking?

Hannah Arendt used the image of a table as a metaphor for our common world. Made up of the things we humans build together and everything that happens among us, within and around those things, our common world both gathers us together and keeps us from falling over each other. But, she argues, it only becomes a public reality when each thing within it can be seen by everyone in their own way without changing its identity, that is, when we know we see sameness in utter diversity (*The Human Condition* (1998) p 57).

Thinking with Arendt, I imagine a round table, with you and I and others seated around it, such that we find that our varied positions offer different perspectives on anything placed upon it. We would see the same thing differently and in so doing, perhaps, bring a shared public reality – a public realm – into being.

I will bring one such table to Five Years to take up residence for two weeks this summer. I invite members of the Five Years collective to join me and my guests for *Rehearsals for A Public Table*, a series of conversations and other forms of being, thinking and doing together that might ‘swim against the tide of efficiency’ (Shoji Morimoto, *Rental Person Who Does Nothing* (2023)).

Activities will take place Thursday – Saturday (27-29 July and 3-5 August) 11:00-18:00

Public view 19:00-21:00, Saturday 5 August.

Just drop by or, let me know you are coming ([carol@machinaloci.com](mailto:carol@machinaloci.com)).

**FIVE YEARS: UNIT 2B1 BOOTHBY ROAD ARCHWAY, LONDON N19 4AJ**

#### **Some guests:**

Dameron Cods (Haunted Network Research Initiative): 28 August, 13:00 ([www.hnri.xyz](http://www.hnri.xyz))

Fran Cottell: 4 August, morning (<http://www.francottell.com/>)

Nayan Kulkarni: 3 August, afternoon (<https://nayankulkarni.com/>)

Elizabeth Tomos: 5 August, afternoon (<https://elizabethtomos.com/>)

Mercedes Vicente: 4 August, afternoon (<https://parsejournal.com/article/a-river-with-standing-personhood-in-te-ao-maori/>)

Nicole Vinokur: 4 August, 11:00 (<http://nicolevinokur.com/>)

### Some things we might do:

- Sit or read together in silence
- Share stories
- Read aloud
- Wiggle and jiggle
- Read out of sync
- Make sounds or music
- Voice complaints
- Listen
- Talk
- Sing
- Draw
- Make things
- Help build a new table
- Watch me
- Witness what's happening
- Make food and eat it
- Mend things
- Questioneer
- Walk

### Context

In 2015 with Arendt's ideas in mind, I made a large round table I called *Table 18* for the number of humans who can sit comfortably around it. A map etched into its surface included plans of six real sites where urban protest took place between 2011 and 2015. I conceived the table as a symbolic unit of resistance and/or a catalyst for solidarity. After a first outing as a discursive space within *Why would I lie?* the Royal College of Art Research Biennial, *Table 18* became the locus of explorations of public collaborative thinking in multiple settings, leading to the idea of the public table.

In 2018, I took over a shopfront in Berkeley California to open *machinaloci space*, a place for playful research into alternative ways of being, thinking and doing together. Over the next four years, *machinaloci space* hosted conversations, residencies, commissions, workshops, artist talks and exhibitions. The main occupant of this space was *Table 15*, my second large round table, and an active participant in a process of nurturing a *community of inquiry* into being.

My work with tables was central to my PhD research (RCA 2021), throwing up questions which continue to engage me. One of these is about the embodied character of individual and collaborative thinking. Our bodies come with us whenever we gather to think. Any collaborative thinking we might do with language is always underpinned by the thinking our breathing bodies do in silent proximity. Thinking together with bodies involves interaction, making and doing things, speaking, moving, arranging objects and spaces, creating images, performing and exploring environments to capture ideas and feelings that individuals cannot know on their own. With our bodies come the values, structures, affordances and limits of our society and culture. The space we occupy, and the extensions of our bodies and minds we arrange within it – tables, eyeglasses, coffees and teas, notebooks, computers, pacemakers, high heels, artificial knees, etc. – bring other possibilities and constraints that affect our thinking. All these things participate in our collaborative thinking, and in whatever *communities of inquiry* we might enable.

Ben Spatz, scholar of embodied research methods, writes of the body as a delicate hinge between ecology and technology,<sup>1</sup> reminding me of the long narrow piece of fabric I tied around my waist

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<sup>1</sup> Embodiment as First Affordance: Tinkering, Tuning, Tracking. In *Performance Philosophy* (2017) Vol 2. No. 2: 257-271.

before entering a Hindu temple precinct in Bali. I was told that the *selendang* symbolically divides the good or clean upper body from the evil or dirty lower body and that wearing it would help me to reflect on these two aspects of human life and thus enter the temple with the clear mind appropriate for religious worship. As a person embedded in Western culture, I am accustomed to seeing only the upper parts of teachers in classrooms, pundits on screens, and important humans of the past in sculpted busts. I sit at desks and tables that sever the upper and lower parts of my body and unconsciously use metaphors that define practices that are above or on the table as open and appropriate and those under the table as secretive, untrustworthy or underhanded.

My tables draw groups together, offer opportunities for shared experience, bounce light and sound to gathered faces and ears, etc. They also tie us down, trap our bodies, constrain our movement and generally thwart whole-bodied thinking. A table might link and separate individuals sitting around it and allow a public realm to emerge, but it also splits those sitting into parts that can be seen and parts that cannot – dividing talking heads from the guts, legs and feet that support them. It constructs an above and an under, encouraging us to distinguish a rational, acceptable and light-filled world above from a separate, mysterious and unlit world below. It persuades us to forget that thinking is an organic process connected to all the sticky, damp, smelly and messy parts of life.

The world is not simply the things we build and the affairs between us, it also includes the material of us, and that brings with it all the animate and inanimate things and beings we rely on. And so, I propose to think of my table as a kind of *selendang* that, by clearly dividing us in half, reminds us what we hold together through the fact of our bodies. What if each time we sit at the table that separates and holds us together and draws a line across each of our bodies, we reflect on our responsibilities in and for the world and in doing so find the clear minds appropriate for thinking together?

Although too big to occupy Five Years as a table, *Table 18* will come with me as fragments, which I will use in a series of arrangements/installations whilst I assemble a new table, *Table 16*. Perhaps an apt reflection of the sense of the shrinking promise of the public realm in London 2023, our conversations will take place at and amidst fragments of tables wedged into a too-small human-made space.

**A few prompts:**

- Existential hinge
- Units of protest
- Kinning
- Mushrooms at the table
- Solidarity
- ???

**What do you think we should rehearse at a public table in 2023?**