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SITES OF CONVERSATION: THE TABLE METHOD

Yonat Nitzan-Green^{ac}, Belinda Mitchell^{ab} and Jane A. Bennett^a

^aPhenomenology & Imagination Research Group, ^bUniversity of Portsmouth, ^cChapel Arts Studios
jane_bennett@iname.com

Through our lives we sit at many tables, eating, preparing food, playing, making drawings, doing homework, working and more. In other words, the table is a focal point where words and materials meet, cross each other, collide or come together. The Phenomenology and Imagination Research Group (PIRG) is an independent research group whose aim is to develop research through active fine art collective practice. (PIRG)'s Table Method (*tm*) is a process that has grown organically over a period of five years and has been cultivated through a desire to bring words, texts, actions and materials together as it invites participants to respond to a text through conversation, the handling of materials and tools. The work draws from the new materialist turn through the ideas of Gaston Bachelard, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Karen Barad. Informed by Susan Kozel's phenomenological enquiry, (PIRG) has extended its practice of conversation as a research methodology to include the phenomenological and material interaction that has become the *tm*. The *tm* is an unfolding dialogue between materials and phenomenological thinking, which expands the possibilities of what conversation can be and become, it utilises material thinking as a way to open out discourse beyond the constraints of language and other representations. This paper discusses the mechanisms and relationships at work in the process of the *tm* as drawing and material engagement enhance textual meaning.

Introduction

The Phenomenology and Imagination Research Group (PIRG) are a group of artists and researchers whose collective practice uses conversation as a research methodology to reflect on and develop their work, both as a group and as individuals. We share a common interest in how material practice can be researched and disseminated through verbal and non-verbal conversation. We are engaged in a 'long conversation' about phenomenological research, rooted in the writing of Gaston Bachelard, drawing on the concept of a phenomenological enquiry of Susan Kozel and reaching out to New Materialist thinker Karen Barad, with a particular focus on the relationship between imagination, ideas, material practice and embodiment.

The *tm* is part of the group's developing methodology of 'expanded conversation', emerging from and building on its history and on-going practice. This essay sets out to articulate the *tm*'s 'mechanisms and relationships' (participant's feedback at PIRG's *tm*, Loughborough 2017). In Barad's terms, it explores the apparatus, entanglement and intra-actions of the *tm*, the phenomena produced between things as space, places, words, people, imagination, tools and materials.

As art practitioners we work through and with material, intuitively and in relationship to text, as well as our thoughts and imaginations. We respond to our embodied experiences, the gestures, actions and marks we make. Gaston Bachelard's research of the imagination presented a poetic way of thinking and writing about the physical relationship with the world, opens out a space for dreaming.

Bachelard's notion of 'material imagination' and his attention to vibrations and resonances rather than to a causal way of thinking inspired PIRG's approach, understanding text in a performative way, through its connection to the lived body. Text, in the context of conversation, is not just a group of words printed on paper or on a computer screen. Rather, it is words, printed, read out-loud, spoken and listen to by all. In other words, text encompasses words, bodies, feelings, emotions, senses, objects, materials, places and space. A process of text-based conversation emerged and was developed by PIRG as a research method.

Seeking a means of linking theory and practice more closely, Susan Kozel's "A Phenomenological Enquiry in Five Acts" (Kozel 2007, p.53) seemed to be a process that supported the group's enquiry. Bringing it close to a phenomenological experience through the introduction of material engagement and space for reflection, the *tm* took form.

In her 'agential realism' theory quantum mechanics physicist, feminist Karen Barad proposes a 'diffractive methodology' which helps us move away from dualism such as theory/ practice. A diffractive methodology is

a method of diffractively reading insights through one another, building new insights and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details, together with the recognition that there intrinsic to this analysis is an ethics that is not predicated on externality but rather entanglement.
(Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012).

Barad describes an agential reality that emerges out of and in intra-actions which help untangle entanglements of matter and meaning. She writes: "Agency is not held, it is not a property of persons or things; rather, agency is an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements." (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012).

Conversation as methodology

As our connections to the global world depend more on technology, we grow more remote to the people with whom we interact. Increasingly, we live in a world where it is possible to connect with others in an instant through the click of a button or the thumbing of a text. But face to face communication is a much richer experience, involving the nuances of body language and intonation; we talk to engage and connect with others. Allan Feldman (professor of science education) distinguishes between conversation and other verbal exchange such as discourse or argument. He writes, "Conversation suggests a connection that is sustained or sustainable and goes beyond chit-chat or chatter." (Feldman 1999). PIRG has been using conversation as the means to discuss and understand theory, and as a way of sharing knowledge and generating new understandings. Inspired by Feldman's research, we set about developing a methodology of collaborative action research through conversation.

Conversation occurs between at least two people who have agreed to cooperate and is a process of exchange of words amongst people.

*In conversation, ideas collide and mingle with other ideas and are diluted and complicated in the process. ... In conversation, one may differ and still not disagree ... People do not insist that partners follow, it is enough that they enter into conversation. Thus conversation is a great respecter of differences.
(Buchmann 1983, 21 quoted in Feldman 1999, p.8).*

Conversation can take any direction and, as Feldman observed, direction in conversation happens when a shared understanding emerges. Whilst Feldman acknowledges the presence of the body, he mainly considered conversation in its verbal form.

PIRG's conversation has a text at its centre. Text is a product of usually a long thought process in which words are carefully placed to communicate meaning. In the conversation the text becomes an entanglement of words and bodies, ideas and materials, where words are read aloud, spoken and listened to by all. The conversation is a collective and transformative process that recognizes difference and change as each person brings his/her own subjectivity through voice, sensibility and body language, absorbed by feelings and emotions where traces of the person's history and memory have left their marks. It aspires to be heterogeneous in its participatory dimension; by this is meant that the criteria for a good conversation is not measured by how loud one's voice is or if one says a lot or little; attentive listening is a form of participation just as important as speaking. It is transformative through growth of understanding that emerges out of this entanglement. As Gadamer writes:

*No one knows in advance what will "come out" of a conversation. ... a conversation has a spirit of its own, and ... the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it – i.e. ... it allows something to "emerge" which henceforth exists
(Gadamer 1992, quoted in Feldman 1999, p.9).*

In this sense, conversation is phenomenological.

A Phenomenological Enquiry

The table developed organically as a conversation, firstly through reading and discussing text and then in the form of an 'expanded conversation', exploring words through material engagement. As artists/practitioners we tacitly understood that the unpicking of complex ideas can be enriched through

doing, through embodied action. Seeking a means of linking theory and practice more closely, Susan Kozel's "A Phenomenological Enquiry in Five Acts" (Kozel 2007, p.53) seemed to be a process that supported the group's enquiry. Kozel, a contemporary phenomenologist and dance practitioner, had developed a method of engagement with both theory and practice through the material of the body and its many subjectivities. Kozel writes: "potentially dense or difficult concepts can be demystified and given a sort of intuitive fluidity once they are read through the body" (Kozel 2007, p.xv). Kozel's method brings together philosophy and material creativity. Hers is a performative phenomenology which opens a shared space for the reflective and the pre-reflective, for working with the body, thinking and writing:

- *Take your attention into this very moment.*
- *Suspend the main flow of thought.*
- *Call your attention to your body and what it is experiencing.*
- *Witness what you see, hear, and touch, how space feels, and temperature, and how the inside of your body feels in relation to the outside.*
- *Take a break (a moment, a day, a week, a year).*
- *Describe what you experienced. Take notes, record sounds or images. Initial notes can be a sort of "brain dump". Do not worry about style, grammar, or relevance at this stage. This stage may occur immediately following your immersion in a specific sensory experience, or it may happen after an interval. Memory and imaginative reconstruction are involved regardless of the lapse of time between experience and documentation of the experience, but obviously too much time passing can dull the recollection.*
(Kozel 2013).

Taking Kozel's process as inspiration, PIRG's *tm* developed as a way of engaging both text and the material in conversation. Participants sit at a table covered in black paper with drawing materials and tools ready to be used. The selected text is read aloud by the presenter which participants are invited to discuss; a brief pause is taken whilst words are digested; participants are then invited to use the materials and tools on the table to respond to the ideas in the text; and finally each participant is invited to speak about their experience of the text or resulting work. Referring to Merleau-Ponty, the body is understood as material through which we engage with the world, "we live our bodies as vehicles of our subjective experience of the world, which is shaped by our interests, values." (Matthews 2006, p.10). The *tm* creates a space for participants to bring together language, words, phrases and the material paste of the imagination to the table. The process engages with body and mind together, allowing space to read and knead an idea, a piece of chalk or to grind a sentence. The pauses are all important as they allow time and space, through the opening out of the breath and body for something to emerge - the pause acts as the material paste through which drawings emerge on the table.

Conversation here is thought of as a drawing, drawing together a group of people, from a text and then to the body, onto a table as a 'field of possibilities', to the many bodies, where the invitation is to allow thoughts, feelings and emotions to emerge through a collective act of drawing. Drawing "is an intimate and immediate process and medium capable of recording the trace of the drawer's thoughts and bodily movements" (Loughborough 2017, conference call), capturing the imagination and the making of knowledge through a process of hammering, breaking and drawing with knives, forks and lumps of chalk.



FIGURE 1: '..... THAT WHICH REMAINS NAMELESS', PIRG WORKSHOP, BIRMINGHAM 2016



FIGURE 3: COLLABORATIVE RESPONSE TO SITE AS TEXT, PIRG WORKSHOP, FORT CUMBERLAND 2018

At PIRG's workshop for Birmingham City University's 'Research Matters: Conversations about research in Arts, Design and Media' (2016), Figure 1, the twenty participants of the *tm* came from such varied disciplines as jewelry making, textiles, design, photography, acting, philosophy and painting, and included both teachers, students and researchers. The focus of this *tm* was to discuss the relationship between studio practice and the academic requirement for a text-based methodology. Whilst the text set the context for the discussion, this *tm* became all about the engagement with materials, as evidenced by responses and feedback from participants. The playful and inventive nature of the *tm* was further enlivened by our host facilitator, Alberto, sprinkling water over the table. This intervention gave permission to participants to play beyond the boundaries of their work and engage with their neighbors.

'Material conversation', PIRG's *tm* at Loughborough (2017), looked at the relationship between the physicality of drawing and the lived experience of conversation, Figure 2. Here is a fragment of conversation, taken from a transcript of the Loughborough *tm*, in response to Bachelard's 'The oneiric source of aesthetics' (Bachelard, 2005, pp.35-36):

- For something to persist or to be more than just a fleeting thing it must find its matter so the matter merely becomes an anchor. All these things are constantly going through and it sort of to hold it, to allow something more reflective to build.

- I am a bit confused about what he is trying to say, about ... he is saying that what you imagine comes before what you see?

- He kind of contradict himself on that one moment he says you need to have the feeling before the landscape, another he says you need to experience the landscape before the reverie. The two are perpetual, it's like an artist who makes very imaginative work for their painting, sculpture, drawing and we have to teach them, we have to anchor them in reality in order for them to, in order for you to see the world clearly you need to offer a more day-dream experience of that. The two things are absolutely pulling-pushing.

At the *tm* in Fort Cumberland, Figure 3, the participants were given a shared task, to explore the future of the Fort. They were asked to walk the boundary lines and ramparts, and then into the casemates and other redundant buildings. The site was used as the text. This process entangled the physicality of the body in a knowing of the place through the material and immaterial structures that form it. Human and non-human residents, the sound of seagulls, the wind and the smell of ruination were fed into the drawing process. This allowed the intra-actions of the site to emerge, as for instance a program of cutting the grass at a particular time of year to allow wild orchids to grow.

The drawing developed through a series of iterations; the surface of the paper was worked into over three separate events. Participants drew their own responses to the site and then into other people's drawings. This process allowed the paper to become multi-layered, tracing the lived experience of others, working with and into the marks they'd left behind. The act of drawing here was shared, the resonance of each participant's actions and mark making grew as they responded consciously and unconsciously to each other. Re-performing the work created an affective site where, through the actions of the table, the participants began to gesture possible futures for the Fort.

The *tm* is a collective experience, not generally one of collaboration, but the environment of the table and proximity of the group as they all set to work is affective. As we go around the table listening to each person speak the thoughts behind their actions or their drawings, we discover how varied are the

responses and thoughts from the same starting point of the text. Ideas emerge from the drawing that were not apparent in the conversation. There are stories behind every drawing or material engagement that were explored with gesture and mark before they had to be put into words. The telling of these stories shows how certain ideas have resonated around the group and how completely different tangents have occurred. It is the process of the table and the time and space of engagement with the materials that allows this diffraction to occur.

The dynamics of the group are important in building a relationship with the text; how people work and respond impacts on other participants and the shape of the conversation that follows. Thus we can say that the *tm* is both social and material, setting an entanglement of matter and meaning.

Discussion

The *tm* developed through Kozel's phenomenological practice has now been cultivated through a number of iterations in educational institutions, galleries, cathedrals, academic conferences – 'Research Matters', Birmingham 2016 and 'Drawing/Phenomenology', Loughborough 2017- and, more recently, on a historic site, Fort Cumberland. This essay makes explicit the mechanisms at work in it, through embodiment and the pre-reflective via Merleau-Ponty, the imagination as material paste in Bachelard and material assemblage from Barad. The *tm* is therefore an invitation to sit with, listen to, digest, allow time to experience, draw out, to collaborate and engage in a material conversation. Through doing this we build a phenomenological conversation of care and attention to ourselves and others, both human and material participants.

The pre-reflective

Phenomenology is an approach to life that includes the body and the experience of living in it, of our cultural, social and political experiences, of words and images that we interact with daily. The approach draws on the pre-reflective of memories in our deep brains of actions long forgotten but which continue to inform who we are and how we act in the world. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's claim that the world exists already before reflection, before conceptual engagement in what he describes as the primitive state of the pre-reflective, Kozel warns of the political implications of reverting to the pre-reflective/pre-linguistic state that hint at the disadvantaged positioning, especially for women, suggesting a reversion to the irrational or "anyone even vaguely 'other'" (Kozel 2007, p.18). To describe this state such as "mysterious" or "primordial" allow us an alternative way of thinking about the pre-reflective and basing it in a linguistic, spatial and physical structure gives focus:

... the pre-reflective is considered through: first, language and gesture; next, a spatial understanding of regions similar to a topographical mapping of external landscapes; and, last, an internal mapping of the regions of the body as if moving from topography to tomography. (Kozel 2007, p17)

Together, these elements build our understanding of our place in the world. In order to reach the pre-reflective, we have to employ the phenomenological process of 'bracketing' – dispelling all preconceived associations with something to leave only its essential state. However, Kozel asks, "Can a reflective practice bracket itself in order to reach a pre-reflective state without violating this state and itself in the process?" She suggests a side-step that conceives of reflection as a porous state that is open to "ambiguity of meaning" and "fluidity of existence" (Kozel 2007, pp. 18/19) that allows access to the pre-reflective without losing our foothold in the reflective. This subtle repositioning resonates with Barad's

preference for the diffractive rather than the reflective reading, that considers the entanglements of subject and object in a phenomenal experience of the world (Barad 2009, p.52).

It is an impossible quest, to consciously strive to not be aware, but perhaps the engagement with materials takes our conscious mind to a different place, to a state of reverie, that destabilizes our line of thought and distracts us into the material world. The act of drawing or engagement of materials in the *tm* allows us to access the pre-reflective state which, in the process of verbal reflection, then leads us to language that describes that place, that state of being and becoming. Perhaps this connection of mind and hand operates in a state that exists before the fixity of language. We then use the method of a phenomenological enquiry to think through and put into language our experience whilst drawing. As one participant in PIRG's Birmingham workshop said, "I don't know what I'm thinking until I draw it."

Material imagination

Whilst Kozel's phenomenological enquiry provides a model around which the *tm*'s process was based, Bachelard's research of the imagination provides a theoretical ground for the *tm*. There are four points as follows. First, dreaming comes before thought: '[L]earned thought is linked to a primitive material reverie; calm, durable wisdom is rooted in a substantive permanence' (Bachelard, 2005, p.35). The *tm* opens out the space of the 'pause', a space between listening to the words being read that allows the participants to digest the text through intra-action with the imagination. Second, the imagination acts as "the faculty of *deforming* images offered by perception ... it is especially the faculty of *changing* images." (Bachelard 2005, p. 19) [Emphasis in the original text. YN-G et al]. Around the table participants become witnesses, through the process of mark making, to the deformation of fixed images and changing images. Third, the being of a poetic image can be experienced and known through tuning to vibrations and resonances, rather than a causal thinking. This leads to the fourth point which is that material imagination connects with the body. For it is in and through the senses of our bodies that vibrations and resonances are felt. Referring to images of matter, Bachelard writes, "Vision names them but the hand knows them." (Bachelard 2005, p.11). Here is the idea that knowing the world is not just a rational process of naming; the body has its ways of knowing too.

The mechanism of the pause, through the material imagination and the embedding of new images into the body, supports a readiness for "material thinking". In her paper 'Materializing Pedagogies', Barbara Bolt "borrows" from Paul Carter the term "material thinking" to give a new understanding of the process of making. Referring to Heidegger, Bolt asserts that it is only in handling materials that we can know their qualities or potential. However, Heidegger revises his theory when he talks about tools in conjunction with technology to say that the handling of tools and materials no longer seeks mastery, but a relationship of co-responsibility where understanding emerges through the 'care' for the qualities of materials in handling, which in art allows the product to emerge. "Handling as care produces a crucial moment of understanding or circumspection. This 'material thinking' not the completed artwork, is the work of art." (Bolt 2006).

What does the engagement with tools and materials add to our experience of the text that is absent in verbal conversation alone? The performativity of the *tm* engages not only our thinking and hearing in the reading and listening to the text, our bodily presence around the table creates a physical connection with others present. When we sit in silent reflection, we breathe the same space. When we reach for tools and materials, we perform a collective body of mark making. This is not a collaboration but the space of the table connects us in our gestures and engagement with materials. The array of tools

includes a ruler, hammers, sieves, mortar and pestle, strings, natural and industrial chalk. This intentional mismatch stimulates an almost child-like material exploration, pushing us to work in unfamiliar ways. The rhythm of response is individual, some preferring to sit quietly and reflect for longer before making a mark, others leaping in immediately with gestural sweeps of chalk. There are sounds of scraping and scratching, with occasional bangs as someone wields the hammer. Sometimes there is chatter, sometimes no voices. Sometimes the drawing has turned into a miniature landscape. As Bachelard writes: 'Any landscape is an oneiric experience before becoming a conscious spectacle. ... But the oneiric landscape is not a frame to be filled with impressions, it is a matter which multiplies' (Bachelard, 2005, p. 36), 'a field of possibilities'. Time is called and we sit back and look around the table.

PIRG's use of chalk in the *tm* is a legacy of our first public workshop during the '10 days - Winchester', a biennial interdisciplinary arts platform focused on chalk (2015), a rock typical to the area of Hampshire. We have continued to use chalk for its enormous versatility; its tactility and unrefined nature taps in to a different range of senses. Architect Juhani Pallasmaa states, "In human interaction alone, 80 per cent of communication is estimated to take place outside the verbal and conceptual channel. Communication takes place even on a chemical level; ..." (Pallasmaa 2009, p.14). The means of making visible our thinking about the concepts we have just discussed comes through our hands. The choices we make about how to use the tools and materials – the drawing - is accomplished by them. In his celebration of the attributes of the human hand, Pallasmaa first makes it clear that the hand is so embedded in the body as a whole that it is "... fundamentally beyond definability." (Pallasmaa 2009, p.37). Evidence of the significance of the hand's development, traced through the history of tool making and use, to the evolution of the brain and the emergence of symbolic thought highlights the important link between hand and brain (Pallasmaa 2009, p.34). We have observed in *tm* sessions that in the final reflection, following the drawing stage, when everyone at the table is given the opportunity to comment on what they produced, many different ideas emerge that were not evident in the earlier conversation. Using the materials gives both time and space for ideas to develop.

Drawing, the *tm* and new materialism

PIRG's approach to drawing has developed through their practice of drawing, drawing together of many texts through conversation and is informed by Karen Barad's 'agential realism' theory. Meaning is not the property of a word or group of words; discourse is not a synonym for language. Barad writes, "Discourse is not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables what can be said." (Barad 2003, p. 20). While Feldman makes a distinction between conversation and discourse, where conversation is presented as perhaps a somewhat idealized structure, Barad's understanding of discourse offers a cultural material construct rooted in both the human and the non-human. In this light, the *tm* is freed from the domination of words and allows an exchange that is based on equality while embracing and celebrating difference. Barad writes:

Statements are not the mere utterances of the originating consciousness of a unified subject; rather, statements and subjects emerge from a field of possibilities. This field of possibilities is not static or singular but rather is a dynamic and contingent multiplicity. (Barad 2003, p.20).

PIRG's *tm* can be considered as a return to this 'field of possibilities' as it brings together words, actions, bodies and materials. The table serves many functions in the past, eating, preparing food, working,

making drawings, doing homework and more. In other words, it is a focal point where words, the imagination and materials meet, cross each-other, collide or come together. If it takes us back to our childhoods, it is because it is a space-time-matter where “statements and subjects emerged”.

Barad wonders how we came to believe that language is the only way to understand the potential of materiality. According to Barad:

to restrict power’s productivity to the limited domain of the “social,” ... or to figure matter as merely an end product rather than an active factor in further materializations, is to cheat matter out of the fullness of its capacity. (Barad 2003, p. 11).

While representation is based on substitutes, performativity allows us to grasp reality as it emerges and materializes in the present. Matter performs itself rather than represent a concept or another object. The *tm* is performative, making the process of materialization visible as an entanglement of matter, ideas, actions and the imagination. It enables an agential reality, a meaning making apparatus. As participants reflect verbally on their process and product of drawing, words are forming phenomenologically, out of and inside experience. “Is the table a solid mass made of wood or an aggregate of discrete entities moving in the void?” (Barad 2003, p.7).

Conclusion

The *tm* acts as ‘a field of possibilities’, a space where the materials of text, paper, words, written and spoken, each body and the many bodies around the table, act as matter to create a material conversation. The *tm* enables conversation to take place through a process of embodiment, through listening to text, engaging with a slowing down, of the mind through a pause to open out the material paste of the imagination. This process entangles the body with materials and words to engage with the conversation through a careful constructed mix of domestic and DIY tools. The hand held tools are juxtaposed with drawing materials to afford alternative ways to experiment and represent emergent thoughts or images. The performativity of the apparatus, tools, surface of the table, our bodies, the space we are in, entangle and cause diffraction patterns which grow and develop the conversation in unplanned directions.

Kozel’s phenomenological enquiry supports the process of embodiment, Bachelard an engagement with the material imagination and Barad an ethics of entanglement with matter. The drawing process exposes conversation as a choir of many different voices, voices of those present in the room and those within our heads, imagination and held in our bodies and the materialities with which we live where matters of care, fact and concern come together.

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