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Citation:

Dyson, G (2023) An Uncanny Performance: Dancing With Tables. *Kritika Kultura* (40). pp. 121-129. ISSN 1656-152X

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Article (Published Version)

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AN UNCANNY PERFORMANCE

Dancing with Tables

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Abstract

My provocation is to suggest that movement of the feminine body alongside seemingly familiar objects provokes especially uncanny conditions where both material subjects become unfamiliar and politically charged.

I argue that this uncanny relationship offers the performer agency to trouble and deconstruct sites of gender-normativity. I discuss my methods for exploring this destabilizing strategy through a reflective narrative of my artwork *Seven Tables* (2016-19). I address the physical and conceptual space of the feminine homely and unhomely whilst seeking to further understand the potentiality for the aging female performer to challenge gender constructs. Concerns with overlapping public and private space seem more relevant since the outbreak of COVID-19. And perhaps these concerns are accompanied by an uncomfortable realization that the home persists as a site of gendered roles and expectations.

Through working with tables, I ask how the (un)familiar object provokes an embodied somatic response, experienced through and as the phenomenological consideration of my moving body. Prompted by Freud's *The Uncanny*, my research is informed by post-structural feminist theorists, particularly Sara Ahmed who draws attention to the significance of the table in constructing gender identities.

My work is an improvised choreography of encounters with the everyday. Through a corporality of rhythms and task repetitions of the body, my work celebrates the familiar feminine whilst troubling persistent constructs. Thus, this article provokes a re-assessment of notions of boundaried femininity.

This writing reflects thirty years of performance art practice and emerges from my practice-based PhD research at the University of Glasgow in 2020.

Keywords

feminism, gender, home, Performance Art, tables, Uncanny

About the Author

Dr. Gillian Dyson is an artist, academic and facilitator, based in Yorkshire, UK. She is a Senior Lecturer in Performance with Leeds Beckett University. Her live performance, video and visual art explores identity, site, objects, and the uncanny body, and she received support from the Arts Council England to further her research practice in 2021. Dyson has exhibited internationally, most recently with Konsthallen, Gothenberg Sweden, Baltic Newcastle Gateshead, Tetley Leeds, and Whitworth Manchester. Gillian also devises and direct, socially engaged sited works and has been a member of several artist-led initiatives including Hull Time Based Arts and New Work Network. She is Acting Chair of the Centre for Live Art Leeds (CLAY).

INTRODUCTION

As I write this, I'm seated at a table which doubles as a dining table, play table, place of work, recreation, and creativity. It's a furniture which operates as a *site* within the architecture of the domestic space or workplace.

Why should my art action with tables trouble our performative relationship with the table (particularly for women), making for a specifically uncanny condition in which both material subjects (woman and table) become unfamiliar and politically charged? This article describes my critical approach to the subject in my performance *Seven Tables*, (a practice-based doctoral research performance), later performed publicly at Gateshead International Festival of Theatre (GIFT), Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, UK (2017). The performance expresses my complicated relationship to the table as an emblem of the familiar, secure and *das Heimlich*, "the homely," (Freud 134).

In essence, I am referring to two notions of the uncanny as described by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay "The Uncanny" ("Das Unheimliche"), the first being felt as everyone's anxiety caused when expectations of normality are challenged, the second pointing to specific discomfort aroused in the disruption of patriarchal logocentrism. It could be generally argued that any theatrical work might initiate aspects of the uncanny. I assert, however, that the collision of female body with emblematic objects of the home is particularly disruptive of the binaries between homely/unhomely, familiar/unfamiliar, which challenge patriarchal hegemony. However, the uncanny result of resisting such binaries is hard to pin down and important to bear in mind as I try to describe a gap that will always escape me.

The association between home and women is enduring. The specific socio-political and economic relationship of women to tables substantiates the inclination I have, to include tables in my performance work. These histories prompt me to reflect on who and how I am in relationship to "table" as cultural and social institution in a way that is governed by gender, class, and age. In turn, this odd and uncanny relationship signals the uncomfortable and unstable feminizing of the domestic and the home.

"So, what happens when the table dances?" (Ahmed 164). In this provocation, I will describe *Seven Tables* and offer a brief historical context of the table before setting out the reasons why I consider this to be an especially provocative action which disrupts the stability of the home(ly) and solicits an uncanny condition.

Describing the dance:

I manoeuvre seven wooden tables, carrying them on my back, dragging, pushing; making small adjustments; considering the orientation of one to another, table to body.

All the time, radios are playing out-of-tune stations: strains of music, chat, news reports, static noise.

Once the table positions seem satisfactory, I “dance” with each table in turn.

I hold a table upright against my body, gripping a leg in one hand and the top in another.

I make circular movements, turning one way then the other, then back again, counting my steps.

I place my feet in relation to the one table leg in contact with the floor, rising and falling on my toes and heels.

My arm is bent as if holding another dancer to my chest.

I adjust my grip; move around.

I feel the surface of the wood and the shape of the table leg.

After each dance, I carefully set the table down again, feeling for the moment that the table leg touches the floor.

I repeat the dance seven times.

I go on to lay the tables with a cloth, then remove it.

I pour water over one; travelling around it with my face in contact with the wet surface.

Later, I pull the tables together to make one long table.

I scatter the surface with the dirt from a vacuum cleaner and hearth, stand on the table and crawl through the dirt.

For now, I am going to focus on the dance action, although the performance activities that surround this moment do colour the way I remember and interpret what took place. The dance seems to me to be a moment when normative relationships between inanimate furniture-things and the human shift, albeit in

a playful way, to confuse our understanding of the stable home(ly). I call this a “dance” because it’s a considered choreography of rhythmic movement. “Dance” also suggests something “light” or social. This is not formal dancing between trained bodies but improvised movement embodying the codified actions and habits of comportment, unconsciously absorbed in social settings. I do not want to assume that women’s experience can automatically be mapped onto concerns with the domestic (Heddon and Turner 16). However, my performance characterizes personal experiences, informing perceptions of space, place and object.

The table is a far more ambiguous, a more uncanny signifier of the domestic than first expected. While we might initially consider dining tables as components of feminine domestic architecture, they demarcate a peculiar masculine place in the home. “Table” is synonymous with both or either domestic order or the communal consensus of work, politics or social space. The architecture of the table determines the number, type, and hierarchy of the community who uses it. As we see in familiar conventions of wedding breakfasts, committee meetings, cafés or classrooms, tables are sites for conventions—in both senses of the word—providing for and prompting mutually agreed upon behaviors that in the extreme can become the rules of etiquette or political decorum that form the basis of social control.

Since ancient times, this furniture has signified the place at the table as a peculiarly masculine precedent within a familial context, the suggestion being that the dining space, as defined by the table, is the place in the private home which allows for strangers or guests to enter; a welcoming transient space, that at the same time, separates visitors from more private spaces of kitchen or bedroom (Ariès and DUBY qtd. in Knights 79). Historical records describe an apparently uncanny disruption occurring as the table becomes an unhomely public site embedded within the homely private house. Late eighteenth century European middle-class dining rooms were spaces for masculine political discourse whilst women “withdrew” to drawing rooms (Rich 59). Although the overall interiors of nineteenth century houses became increasingly feminine through codification of interior details of décor, the outward-facing dining room appeared contrastingly masculine (Kinchin 13). Ordinary nineteenth- and twentieth-century family dining might also be a highly valued daily occurrence but was more likely to happen at shared kitchen or living room tables where male or female heads-of-household presided over routine, ritual and celebration meals.

I speculate that the table for the poor was more likely to be workplace than dining place, suggesting perhaps an inherent uncanniness associated not only with the functionality of the object but of *who* used it, be that philosopher or piece worker. Ahmed also reminds us that tables present a place or object associated with masculine reasoning and knowledge. The philosopher’s ideas begin with the

writing table. Ahmed continues—in relation to Edmund Husserl—as such, “because the writing table is the object nearest the body of the philosopher it appears in [his] writing,” perhaps revealing something about the “orientation of phenomenology, or even of philosophy itself” (Ahmed 3).

Therefore, the table becomes an ordering device. It “enables thought to operate upon the entities of our world, to put them in order, ... to group them according to names that designate their similarities and differences” (Foucault xix). This statement implies that the table in itself is an instrument of identification that might have the potential to order or “mark” my identity. Because the table holds with both the feminine maternal expression of nurturing and with the masculine patriarchal familial structure and sense of gravitas and importance of thought, I propose it as an especially uncanny object to perform with. In *Seven Tables*, I seek to disrupt the table’s ordered identity and effect the influence of this ordering on my own identity. I am suggesting that my table dance does not “orientate”, but rather creates a place of uncanny disorientation and disruption.

On the surface, my dance appears uncomplicated and good-natured. Yet, because of the contextual identity of the inanimate table, normative partnering is skewed. The dancing woman is performing a masquerade, a rather comedic enactment of a couple dancing, perhaps typical of what women do to play to men’s desires (Irigaray qtd. in Butler, *Gender Trouble* 64). And yet, there is no man here—instead, I embrace a proxy partner. I lead. Movement of my feminine body alongside a seemingly familiar yet masculinized table provokes an especially uncanny condition in which both material bodies become unfamiliar and politically charged. In the slippage between feminine/masculine, human/non-human, inanimate/animated partnering, the identity of the woman performer also becomes troubled and un-resting for a moment. Gender is, as philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler reinforces, “in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (“Performative Acts” 520). While I am enacting a stylized version of my gendered identity through the dance act I argue, because the dance partner is an inanimate object, normative binaries are disrupted. This deconstructive to-ing-and-fro-ing exposes the illusion of a fixed gendered self.

My arms and legs measure up to the table, exploring its lines in bodily intimacy of face, hand, hip. In turn, the table shapes my body, revealing and challenging the muscle-memory of body-with-table or the sedimentation of histories of the repetitive, familiar bodily action (Butler, “Performative Acts” 524). To “place” suggests belonging or accommodation. It is my aim therefore to not only “place” and mis-place the table but also bring into question my own place (geographic

and political) by re-placing (substituting) and re-placing (repeating). Questioning “whose body is it made for” leads me to ask where and why to place my body in relation to the gendered objects of the home. What happens to the political and psychic understanding of object and body when physical proximity is explored, messed around with and disturbed? My performance provocation demonstrates to me the potential of physical exploration to disorientate the coherence of the home(ly), presenting a *different table* “when it is with me than it would be without me” (Ahmed 54).

The literal enactment of “turning tables” brings the table to life, paralleling the uncanny anthropomorphism Freud saw in inanimate things (Freud 140). Dancing turns the table, disrupting the conventional adjacency with the human body that the furniture usually creates. I am deliberately re-orientating myself to the table in such a way that unbalances the object and causes it to be dependent on the rotating movement of my body. Ahmed suggests, “[we] ‘turn toward’ objects, which appear in their perceptual ‘thereness’ as objects given to consciousness” (25). I argue that by paying attention to the tables, I bring notional consciousness to them, much as Freud describes the child willing their toys to life by concentrating their gaze upon them (Freud 141). Furthermore, I am considering how my gender is “instituted through the stylization of the body [...] under-stood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 520). Thus, *Seven Tables* presents and deconstructs a fixed notion of femininity by presenting the female body alongside a second subject-object which appears to have a fluid and shifting gendering. Disruption of normative domestic behaviours of the table and woman—or stylizing them—stops the continuity of the patriarchal patterns of the familiar homely home.

CONCLUSION

I have described how, through the act of performance, I uncovered why an unconventional encounter of objects and body as subjects establishes an uncomfortable shift in expectations from normative experiences of the home(ly). Through performance, I trouble the preconception of the table as a constant, stable against a body which is malleable and fallible. I argue that the performative interaction of body and table serves to destabilise and make uncanny this table/body relationship. In turn, this uncanny performance suggests a deconstruction of the feminine domestic and homely. By dancing with tables, I am provoking an inversion of the relationship between person and object, inviting the object to have a life of its own and communicate the absence of real human-to-human communication and “compulsion to repeat” (Royle 90).

The table is a metaphor for that which draws us back, the home to which we return and are returned to. Likewise, relocating the body draws attention to the underside and questions what is beneath or beyond that which is familiar and seemingly understood.

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