

## *Book Table Chair*



**Kathryn Ricketts (movement) and Ellen Moffat (media) fuse curiosities and expertise in an interdisciplinary exploration.**

**Gertrude Stein text serves as the foundation to trouble and probe the relation between text, character, sound and story.**

***Book Table Chair* is a dynamic interplay with theatre, dance and sound where we ask the questions who or what are the drivers in constructing a dramatic event?**

***A report on a workshop conducted as part of Nightswimming's Pure Research program, in association with Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University. Held at SFU's Woodward's Centre, in Vancouver on May 27, 28, 29, 2013.***

***nightswimmingtheatre.com***

**Questions from Ellen to Kathryn (following with comments from Ellen)**

**Ellen: I think we moved away from our original proposal. Can you talk about this shift from your perspective?**

Kathryn: Do I think we shifted from our original proposal?

Yes and no.

I am grateful the research project was nothing like what we expected and that there were shifts in the terrain that we thought we had mapped out. This is what research is...looking and re looking...returning and seeking again. I know we re-printed the schedule and objectives on the second day and revisited the 'plan' and felt reaffirmed that we were still in the *arena* of the imaginative play we had set out for ourselves and the questions we posed still remained and seemed to be present in the foundations of our experimentations.... I include these below:

**What we want to explore**

*"We are asking how a stage set and the players are both the material and agents for theatrical production. Our work together is questioning issues of causality in form and content between text, object and dancer/actor."*

**How will this play out in a three day exploration?**

*We are more interested in the text in relation to the object and the activity as a formal, physical, technical and sonic exploration.*

**How does this research expand beyond the three days?**

*"We are asking how a stage set and the players are both the material and agents for theatrical production"*

We want this intensive lab to provide us with understandings in regards to interfacing with object/story/sound which can then be articulated and adapted by actors and dancers who are interested in working in a new way with character and script development.

Yet... What emerged from these brief encounters constantly surprised me. I found myself saying "I've never done that before..." (often). Improvisations ended with excitement, frustration, curiosity, wonderment and fatigue. This became the elixir that nourished our quest and fueled are very thought provoking and sometimes troubling conversations. Conversations that extended our ponderings beyond the studio and this research project to deeply seated and conditioned notions of performer and spectator and the construction/creation of a performance event.

*E: (in response) Perhaps our research proposal lacked focus: notions of "storying" using objects as interfaces to provoke and respond to sound; personifying the object(s); dismantling traditional notions of character and prop; collaboration. We proposed using*

*objects (book, table, chair) as central characters to explore the interplay of text, sound, movement and our-selves. I expected the objects would be central to our research.*



**E: Did you see our project as collaboration? Which elements worked best for you?**

K: YES!

I saw the project as a collaboration with many elements.

In our quest to disrupt the hierarchies and sequencing of building a performance I believe the collaboration was comprised of many elements that had very surprising influences.

Although you, Ellen, were my first point of contact at the end of every exploration/improvisation, I was always surprised by how much *other* elements influenced my choices and indeed influenced the outcome of our work together. Our players: the text, the furniture, the sound, the space, those who occupied the space and ourselves as performers became almost equal in the experimentations. At times this was very disconcerting as I felt I needed to surrender to the *call* of each of these elements at any given moment and to listen to which factor was the ‘loudest’ or the clearest call for response...at times that was the corner of the table and other times it was the sound of an amplified table leg and other times it was the piercing eyes of my co-performer. In a way I should say my co- ‘human’ performer as I felt that we had actually achieved the intention of moving into the blurred boundaries of performer and object as I began to see all of these influences as performing partners with me.

*E: I felt we worked independently in a shared space more than collaboratively with some wonderful exceptions – our direct encounters with the same object and interface. Then we needed to negotiate (with) the physical interface, space and each other. For me, these moments began to open an arena for negotiation in real time and space. They also raised questions about our roles as performers or characters and our relationship to each other.*



**E: You put significant effort into memorization and interpretation of the Stein text in advance of the studio session. I had professional recordings of the full Stein text, assuming these recordings would give us distance from the text per se so that we could concentrate on the objects and storying. What were your intentions and goals with the text?. How did you respond to the recordings? Did you work with, against or despite them?**

K: Now that is three questions!!

Ok the first question – I was so happy that you introduced Stein’s *Tender Buttons* and suggested we bring this into the project as it allowed us to work with something already formulated giving permission to truly play with and against this form. Our original proposal stated what we already had in place:

**What we already have in place**

*“We discovered that the content of this work and the process whereby the content was mined and re-shaped created a rich and fertile ground for community development.”*

The genesis of my doctoral work in personal narratives triggered by objects and embodied play, served as the foundation of our first stages of generating text for our work together. I felt I brought this knowledge base to the residencies and subsequent presentations of this research. Similarly Ellen brought information already in place in regards to construction of instruments that could function as dynamic receptors and amplifiers within and through these stories. Our initial explorations were centered on finding out how these two bodies of practice could interface and admittedly, how Ellen and I could work as collaborators. This first year of our work together served as a brilliant foundation to further investigate areas we had yet to explore about sound, story, object and performer as equal partners in creative constructions

It also allowed me to elongate my continued curiosity and attraction to Stein's writing. My previous work with Penelope Stella and Gina Stockdale exploring Gertrude Stein has set up allegiance to non-linear text and the possibilities this opens up to further explorations in theatre and dance using Grotowski techniques. My work with voice, character and movement is fractured and fluid by nature and then bringing this to the text and the work that you do Ellen, with such a wide and rich range of sound, it was entirely stimulating! – I felt I had arrived in an arena of rich possibilities with brilliant parts colliding and fracturing, constructing and de constructing our meaning making in new ways of understanding narrative. It also served as a ground to re examine the ways in which we come into meaning making through performative explorations. Sometimes I did not even know what our questions were but the fact that we were in a quest full of intention and imagination felt enough.

### 2nd question

My initial response to the recorded text is that it was fast. I assume that the readers that were recorded were stationary and so the text tumbled on whereas my speaking the text was embedded in spontaneous interplay with furniture, sound, you and space and time and as such, my delivery often slowed down, repeated and fractured. When I did work with the recordings it seemed that the tempo invited an urgency to keep up that was reflected both in my delivery of the text and in my body as I raced from speaker to speaker drawn to, chasing or running from the sounds of the text from the readers.

### 3rd question

As a result of this urgency I believe that at times I was working with the impulse which might have 'played out' as against the recorded text as my relationship to it became often adversarial, forcing me to work faster. I actually liked that as it brought another side to myself as performer allowing a forcefulness at times and a vulnerability at other times.

I also liked that the delivery of the text often became the speakers (amplifiers) themselves as opposed to the actors inhabiting the voice. So the object of speaker became personified as I sat on them in order to facilitate an exchange or yelled at them or blew into them hoping for a response.



**E: As performers, we had different needs. I controlled the digital sound – levels, activation of the mics, spatialization of sound and worked with experimental sound, chance, unpredictability and causality. What did you think of the non-predictable aspect of the audio component? As a performer, would you have preferred fixed rather than variable sound?**

K: I loved the unpredictability of the sound and the sound making as that was such a performative act in the making of the brilliant soundscapes.

I loved that here was not a predictability and especially that sometimes furniture was amplified and treated and sometimes not.

Sometimes you played on ‘my’ table and sometimes I played on ‘your’ table.

This unpredictability was sometimes difficult in our post experimentation analysis in order to reference and compare the other explorations but the benefit was that we were generating new information each time and unafraid to dive deep into unfamiliar territory.

*Excerpt from thesis*

*When a score is designated, it is like a glass encasing the flickering light of the candle. He speaks about the flame as what illuminates the score:*

The flame is alive. Just as the flame in the candle glass moves, flutters, rises, falls, almost goes out, suddenly glows brighter, responds to each breath of wind—so my inner life varies from night to night, from moment to moment. (Schechner, 1977, p. 19)

My need as a performer was Advil at night!

As my work at the University renders my dancing practice as an event that happens on the edge of my schedule and my desk, I felt some HUGE insecurities and frustrations at first in terms of being able to physically do what I wanted and to stay safe in my body as I hung sideways off of a chair, etc.



However I was in very good company in the studio and felt very supported in that the insecurity was acknowledged and then we were able to move through this to a place of rolling up our sleeves and just getting to work! (with Advil waiting)



*E: I found your exploration of the sound interfaces intriguing, in particular your initial response to the mic'ed table. I thoroughly enjoyed the intimacy of your discovery of the table as an instrument.*

**E: I'm interested in your thoughts about the spatial re-configuration of the environment and its effect on our relations and interactions and your performance.**

K: Well we had set up the two tables and my various 'costumes' on the first day so that both the sound making table and the 'theatrical' table equally occupied what we thought of as the performing space.

I think that was a very good move.

The studio is such that there is a bank of beautiful windows at the other end and I was so naturally drawn to this, that my 'front' became that bank of windows looking on to Hastings Street.

There were reasons for this and there were disadvantages for this and I will talk about both.

In my work with Penelope, we work with eye focus in the body, eye focus outside the body but in the room, eye focus outside the room and eye focus on the horizon, and I definitely played with this within the fluidity.

Thornton Wilder remarked: ‘A myth is not a story read from left to right, from beginning to end, but a thing held full in-view the whole time. Perhaps this is what Gertrude Stein meant by saying that the play henceforth is a landscape of character, text, movement, choice and intention. In Stein’s texts the – relatively sparing – explanation of her theatre concept are repeatedly linked to images of actual landscapes. If it is often tempting to describe the stagings of the new theatre as landscapes, this is rather due to traits anticipated by Stein: a defocalization and equal status for all parts, a renunciation of teleological time, and the dominance of an ‘atmosphere’ above dramatic and narrative forms of progression.’

Scenic poem as a whole

Landscape Stagings

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Often I would be drawn to the eyes out of the room and hence through the windows when pulling a memory or a distant thought. However this was the spot where the dramaturgs stationed themselves, sometimes deep into work and other times glancing over at our work. I must say it was difficult to disengage with the traditional ways of operation with ‘outside eyes’ in the forum as it often comes with a longing for reaffirmation or the very least, constructive direction towards ‘success’. In this case it took days (and I am not even sure I achieved this) to disengage with that historical viewpoint and to allow another way of being in a studio with others.



When we decided to move the chair for ‘my table’ to the other side resulting in my back to the audience. I was able to begin thinking about a 3 dimensional space with all perspectives as sources for my choice making.



The four speakers surrounding the space gained a new value, as did the walls. My relationship with you didn't change as much with this shift as I was very connected to you through the sound making in both set-ups.

*E: My impulse in positioning objects within the studio was (not surprisingly) closer to installation than to a theatre stage. I wanted to avoid frontality to an imaginary audience or a hierarchy between us as the performer in front and sound tech in back. I also wanted to increase our potential to engage with each other. For me the visual and eye contact was important. I felt this worked best when the tables faced each other; the speaker placement helped to define the boundaries of the space. This space became a world (our world); it connected us and allowed us to respond to each other more directly.*

**E: How did you work with Stein text in relation to your creative choices with intention and characterizations?**

K: At first I worked with the text in sections in order to memorize it.

I memorized it in order to be able to work more fluidly with the other elements that could and would influence my choices once in the studio with you.

*Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990) refers to this astuteness as “the power of free play sloshing against the power of limits” (p. 33).*

These sections were separated into flashcards color coded according to the three sections; table (orange), book (yellow) and chair (green). On the other side of the chair were images that were connected to Gertrude Stein and Alice B Toklas. These images, situations and expressions were recorded and placed on the back of the flash cards to help anchor the text. I felt I needed these devices as they served to anchor the text enabling it to enter my memory system.

However when I arrived to the studio I understood that I needed to dislodge the anchors as they prevented me from working with new possibilities within an entirely new context.

Instead what began to enter my image range, especially during warm ups, were a series of archetypical characters that radically influenced the delivery. Suddenly I seemed occupied by an auctioneer, a junkie, an executioner, a secret sprite and several others. They changed my tone, cadence, quality and of course movement from one section to the other and helped to dislodge the initial images to a place of random fluidity.

I felt that this kind of dance/theatre de frag helped to create porosity in the experimentations so I could allow sound, space, time and performer to influence me on an immediate level. Any habituated or acquired manners in which I had come to know the text were washed away and instead it became a conduit for other forces that were present in every experimentation. This is one of the most fascinating pieces of information that came up in the 3 days and something I will take with me in my future work with this.



*Thanks for the journey Ellen!*

## Textual Archives

Expansion, depth and scope of material  
Culture shock and self identity  
Recognizing that change was necessary in the delivery  
Getting used to the boys in and out  
Developing a warm up  
Disrupting the hierarchy of performers

### Day 2

Dislodging the association and fixed intentions of the text  
Working with River  
Fulcrum, cantilever and hinge another layer of attention  
Range of emotions – rage is my default  
More contact with Ellen  
Change the facing of furniture and worked with Ellen as front

### Day 3

Began to work more fluidly with text and image and sound  
Extreme characters  
Began to work with formal elements, cables and speakers  
Emotions became very accessible  
First got locked in the transitions being incremental,  
thinking that big jumps are inauthentic



## Questions from Kathryn to Ellen (*following with comments from Kathryn*)

### **K: What was your relationship to the text in your sound making and why did you choose “Tender Buttons”?**

E: My interest in Tender Buttons is its deceit of simplicity. Stein disrupts language and meaning. By detaching words from meaning, words become autonomous; they become objects. I wanted to explore objects and sound in a parallel way using recordings of the text with experimental sound-making. I can approach Stein’s text through Cubism’s deconstruction and rotation of images into multiple spatial planes as a formal and conceptual inquiry. “Enacting” this understanding through sound, movement and collaboration was the challenge.

I’ve been working with this text for more than a year using various experimental approaches (writing & erasure of hand-written text on walls overlaid on large-scale hand-drawn maps of Parisian neighbourhoods; recordings of me reading the text aloud to my body rhythms while walking in public or while ascending / descending staircases).

I wanted to relate the recordings of the text to objects, sound and space. “Burying” the sound recordings in objects relates to concept of hidden identity within Stein’s text. Releasing the text through movement or action(s) suggests an act of uncovering identity.

The specific passages of ‘book’, ‘table’ and ‘chair’ also represent physical objects. The physicality and immediacy of the objects connect to our interests in objects, story / narrative, sound and movement.

Working with text that I was not attached to emotionally gave me distance for exploration without protection or privileging of certain passages.

*K: Response: I felt the same way. My relationship to ‘other’ generated text at first gave a neutrality allowing us to focus on other elements of the process and then I found it very quickly added a layer of complexity to the process as it was impossible for me to learn and deliver the text without allowing it to embed the heat, vitality and multiplicity of a variety of meanings.*

### **K: How do you see yourself and your work in relation to performance and performativity. What interested you most in this aspect of the project?**

E: Creating live sound using direct actions on physical interfaces or responding to external events is performative. The physicality of materials, spatiality of sound, real time sound-making through live actions, experimental sound and ephemerality of performance interest me.

The objects offered physical interfaces for interactive engagement for sound-making. I developed an “instrument” using objects, hardware and software as interactive interfaces that either of us could perform freely and physically. The audio software and processing allowed for the creation of new sounds as live effects or triggering of sound files through intention or chance, connecting the text (or sound) with objects. The instrument needs more development.

*K: I agree with the invitation for physical interface, there were often times when the sound making led my movement choices and thereby shaped my theatrical impulses. I especially loved finding my way to ‘your’ table and to you at mine. There was a whole other palette of choices that*

*came with that new territory that were some how linked to another world.*

### Sound sample

#### **K: What relationship did the source of sound have with the text and the performer(s)?**

E: The challenge for me was how to relate text, objects, action and movement. The objects “contained” text as recorded sound. Actions and interactions with the objects released the text as recorded sound. The engendered recordings (female and male voice) layered the complexity of the character.

The recordings of Stein’s text functioned as echo, the reflective mind, inner voice, memory and catalyst for your movement. I liked the relationship of the recorded text with your movement. I think they disrupted your focus and containment; they broke your train of thought or performance. I thought these sound sources provided a bridge or dialogue between performance and text (live or recorded).

In the studio, the live text became central. This was confusing for me. Initially I tried to respond to your movement and performance with experimental sound using objects as interfaces for sound-making. I tried to simulate sounds that suggested actions plausible to the act of writing such as pencil on paper, erasure, body movement in a chair, pages flipping, paper ripping or had potential as sonic character. I was not satisfied with the results.

The sound element benefited from text recordings, experimental sounds as well as the live analogue sound. Together these elements layered spoken word with recordings with chance juxtaposition with movement.

I did not want to prepare or compose a score as an independent element. I wanted the sound to be responsive within the context of the whole project, connecting objects and actions. I wanted (or tried) to relate the sound to your performance.

My intentions with sound were as:

- Response to your embodied actions
- Index of your actions
- Trigger for your actions
- Sound effects for text or image within text
- Sound as text / text as sound
- Experimental sound (materials, actions)

*K: This is what I call the oujia board effect when both think the other is driving the results. For me the causal relations of sound, text and performativity came closer and closer to equal status as we moved through the three days. I often felt the analysis of what we were doing was unsatisfactory as we tried to squeeze a concrete logic to the performative act that had just transpired. However I do understand that this part was equally important as we wanted to extract information that could be applied for future experimentations in this realm.*

#### **K: What choices did you make in preparation for this project?**

E: I prepared software (for real-time processing of sound) and hardware (contact mics, sound

splitter) as tools for activating objects as instruments, and made professional recordings of the Stein text. I expected the recordings would be a significant element of the sound through actions that would trigger and release the recordings. I also experimented with actions on and with the objects (the book table and chair) for sound making.

Your memorization of the entire text surprised me and complicated my preparation for the sound component – my preparation became redundant. Consequently I brought additional objects with potential for sound-making. In the studio, my approach to sound making with the objects was improvisational.

I had considered working with three objects only – a book, table and chair –for sound-making but was not confident in my ability to perform with three objects only. I'll hold onto this for the future.

*K: I too felt that the preparation for the studio time with you caught me by surprise as the conditions and elements of our experimentations were so radically different than those in our prep context. This is what I found brought exciting triggers to the work as I dug in to work with a difference in time, space, sound and observers in a new way.*



**K: What did you find out in this project? Were there any important discoveries?**

E: The instrument became an extension of my body and movement. I began to perform the objects, interfaces, sensors and software more fluidly through intentional actions and general body movement. I began to be “liberated” from the harness of the keyboard and computer screen metaphorically and physically. And I was less bound to you (or to watching you). This allowed me to greater openness or independence in my movement and sound making.

I had not planned a score; I consider this a fixed or organized approach to sound. My approach was responsive using objects and actions for sound making.

However, on reflection, I do think a composition might have posed an interesting conceptual challenge to the text, objects and sound. It would have added an additional element and character. It would also have given the sound autonomy.

I positioned the tables, stools with speakers, chairs to create an installation environment (a familiar working environment for me). Defining an environment assisted me with understanding relationships – of movement to objects (our separate bases), of objects to each or us, and of us to each other. The physical space had some influence on our relations.

*K: I love this idea of an instrument becoming the extension of the body. I also felt that in terms of the causal relationship to sound as I rolled on the miced table and felt the sounds of restlessness through the speakers, but also how the speakers and recorded text drove me to operate in the space in a way that felt I was connected by laser beams or sticky thread.*

### **K: What surprised you?**

E: On reflection, I am aware that the surprises reflected my expectations and assumptions. Shifts from the written proposal were problematic due to timing – there was not enough time for me to address the shifts. However, some of the shifts were beneficial.

Initially I thought our proposal had a clear structure and focus: to work with and perform “one” physical interface – a book, table, a chair - as an instrument using recordings that would be released by actions on/with the objects. Having separate physical stations gave each of us a personal space and increased our independent exploration, but reduced our contact. In the end, the separate spaces opened up questions about our identities, roles or temporal references as performers and characters.

Your focus was on voice and movement as an ongoing exploration and experimentation with minimal repetition or sequencing. Your effort was directed toward building a vocabulary of movement and interpretation of live text. I found that some of your actions were jewels – such as when you used your body as a bridge between the chair and the table. I also was interested in your response to the spatialized recorded text as movement and as a character. There were several instances of open interaction and interplay between us, but there were fewer than I expected. Collaborative actions were identified in our preparation for research.

*K: Yes you are right that I worked hard at working fluidly in response and in provocation with all of the elements in the room and that includes the sound. And that fluidity did not carry a repeatability in the actual sequencing or vocabulary but I did feel that it began to build a container of knowledge in terms of ‘repeatable systems’ that could be named and referred to later or in our future experimentations. This was helpful for me. Vocabulary in a dancer is sometimes a curse and sometimes a tool as we struggle to utilize our strengths and yet try to invite new kinesthetic pathways. This was my work in the experimentations, to stay fluid and to continue to explore new ways of working physically in relation to all influences.*



**K: What questions remain for you as a result of this project?**

E: What is the voice of the text? The difference between the live text and the text recordings was significant. Your interpretation was dramatic and directed toward achieving a subjective reality of the text. The recordings privileged the language and text as autonomous objects without imposing meaning.

What is the sonic equivalent to Stein's approach to language? Or, (how) can Stein's text be represented as autonomous sound? Are objects the best means of accomplishing this? What are the alternatives?

The studio space was non-specific in time and space. How would defining a site such as a domestic writing space have affected our research? What about differentiated temporal setting(s) – historic, contemporary? This opened up questions of our role(s) and function(s) which in turn would provide filters for our actions and relationship with each other.

Questions to challenge from our initial set of questions: Can object(s) or an "instrument" be a character? Is Stein's text related to story or storying per se? What are the needs or the inquiry into autonomous objects or sound? How can Stein's text best be performed?

Collaboration requires strong communication and reveals assumptions, differences in vocabularies, expectations and goals. How do collaborators collaborate best? New projects involve shifts in understanding over time; how do collaborators best maintain communication over distance?

*K: These are all great questions! To end a quest with even more questions than when we started is a gift and I am so grateful we had this opportunity to allow for this!*

E: Yes, this was a stimulating experience which has opened up new avenues for our future creative explorations. Thank you for your time and energy.