

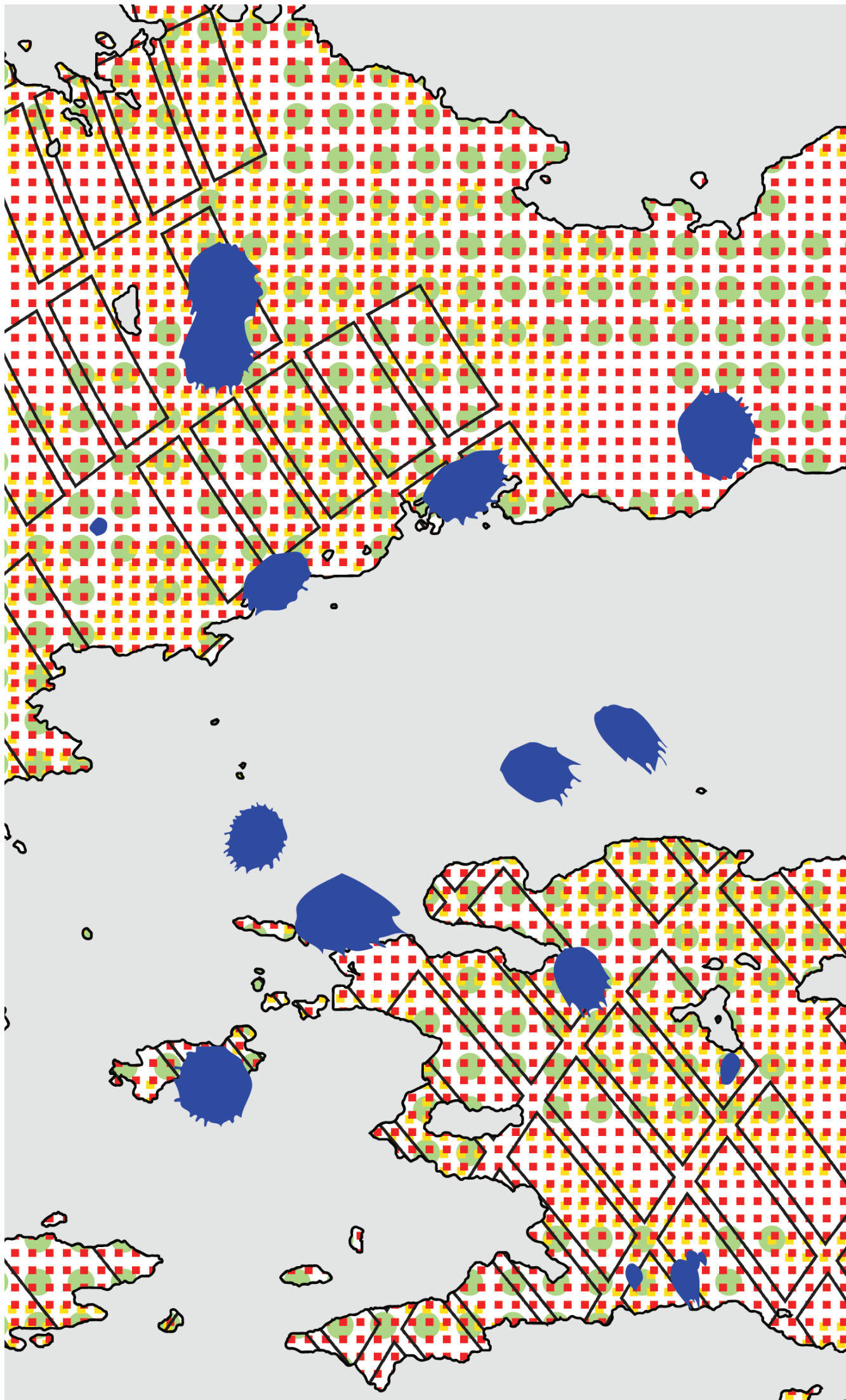


Table Of Contents

p. 14	The Cost of Paying Attention by Juliana Castro
p. 22	A Place for Relating to Water by Lucy Siyao Liu
p. 30	Cybernetics of Reproduction a conversation with Neta Bomani, Melanie Hoff, and Elizabeth Perez
p. 44	Who Cares? by Emma Rae Bruml Norton
p. 50	Holding Hands a conversation between Lily Nguyen and Fiona Carty
p. 64	Defining Dark Matters by American Artist and Zainab Aliyu
p. 74	Measuring the Internet by Lai Yi Ohlsen

p. 80	Placeholder by Austin Wade Smith
p. 88	[Title] by Shea Fitzpatrick and Madeline Hsia
p. 96	This Grand, Diffuse Tradition by William Pan
p. 104	Green as a Metaphor by Charlie Reynolds
p. 110	The Art of Tending to Oneself by Alice Otieno
p. 116	Rituals of Care a conversation with Ingrid Raphael, Rae Dand, and Onelson Nicholas
p. 128	What Do People Do All Day? by Michael Bell-Smith
p. 136	Tools for Cultural Production Omar Mohammad in conversation with Shiraz Gallab, Florence Fu, and Darin Buzon
p. 154	Khorasan Dreamscapes a conversation between Weeda Azim and Rona Akbari
p. 164	Southern Electronics by R.C. Clarke
p. 172	On Tables by Clemens Jahn
p. 180	Karen Blixen's Flowers by Meg Miller

On Tables

by Clemens Jahn

<https://www.are.na/clemens-jahn/tables>

My are.na channel “Tables” dates back to 2013, when I began collecting images of tables in preparation of a workshop I organized at the neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst Berlin (The New Berlin Art Society). Originally founded in the aftermath of the 1968 student protests, the nGbK was conceived as a desperately needed counter model to the prevailing conservative, top-down structured German art societies at the time. In step with that ongoing legacy, the workshop, titled “Building Tables,” was part of a larger exhibition and event program, a critical retro- and introspective into the art society’s direct democratic organizational structures.¹

1. “reiseagentur” (travel agency) was an exhibition, publication, and event program organized by Anja Bodanowitz and Birgit auf der Lauer at nGbK Berlin from 1 August 2012 until 31 July 2013, as part of the nGbK art mediation grant.

In the workshop, a group of participants was given the task to collaboratively create a wooden table that could represent a direct democratic form of assembly and organization. Given the short amount of time at hand, the group came up with a remarkably sophisticated and precise solution: They built a one-legged circular table, which required at least two or three people to stand by and stabilize it to prevent it from toppling. The more people who were standing at the table, and the more evenly distributed they were standing, the more firmly the table would become, until finally properly usable as a stable surface.

■ *fig. 1*

More than just a table, the result of the workshop was a kind of symbolic performative sculpture, an “activation object,” to use a term by the artist Franz Erhard Walther.² But even the more common and everyday tables can shed light on how we organize and structure social and professional relations; how we tend to our meals, families and friends, work and study, meetings and negotiations, guests and celebrations, coworkers and employees, our bodies and our physical health. The types, shapes, and sizes of our tables, their functions and features, their materials, heights and weights are both infrastructure for and signifiers of our social relations and interactions.

While the majority of tables are most likely conceived in complete oblivion to their social effects, there are

2. <https://hausderkunst.de/en/exhibitions/franz-erhard-walther>

some specimens designed with the firm belief that they could actually change society. In 1974, for instance, Italian designer Enzo Mari published his famous “proposta per un'autoprogettazione,”³ a collection of manuals on how to self-build 19 different pieces of furniture with the most common and affordable materials in Italy at the time: simple wooden boards, nails, a hammer, and a saw. The designer’s intention was to de-commercialize and democratize design furniture and make it available to anyone “apart from factories and traders.”⁴

In the preface of the 2002 re-edition of “autoprogettazione?” Enzo Mari notes that “the reasons that had pushed me to carry out the proposal certainly have not changed: in fact they have worsened.”⁵ Only two years later, in 2004, conceptual artist Rirkrit Tiravanija produced a polished stainless steel version of one of the Enzo Mari tables with a set of four chairs for an art fair, perverting the democratic and inclusive designs into their total opposite: a highly exclusive, heavy, and expensive one-off art sculpture that felt like an obituary to Mari’s original intentions.⁶ A more recent initiative, however, might be a sign of hope toward keeping the project’s initial spirit alive. During the so-called refugee crisis in 2015/2016, Enzo Mari granted the rights to build and sell his auto-progettazione furniture to a small Berlin-based wood shop providing young refugees with carpentry work.⁷

3. Somewhat translates to “a proposal to self-design” (translation: CJ); Enzo Mari, *autoprogettazione?*, Mantova 2002, p. 5.

4. Ibid., p. 5.

5. Ibid., p. 5.

6. In March 2019 the artwork was sold at auction house Sotheby’s for USD \$16,250. Cf. <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.262.html/2019/contemporary-curated-n10027>

7. <https://www.cucula.org/enzomari>

In Berlin, “attitudinal design”⁸ or design with a socio-critical agenda, has a long standing tradition. In the 1980s and ’90s, members of the Neues deutsches Design (New German Design) movement tried to shake up the industry with more “honesty and credibility.”⁹ Part of this movement was the design duo GINBANDE who came up with a modular table system called “Tabula varia” which consisted of a set of identical small triangular tables that could be combined and arranged into various shapes, similar to a polygon mesh—be it a circle, a rectangle, or more unconventional shapes such as a large triangle, a star, an L shape, or an organic blob. It was up to the user to complete the product.

■ fig. 2

GINBANDE’s self-proclaimed goal was to investigate “the familiar typology of an object ... for its possible function beyond itself” and to “fundamentally question the one-dimensional use that is actually fixed or firmly established and associated with it.”¹⁰ The antithesis to their approach might be found in the heavy marble and bronze tables from the ruins of ancient Roman villas, which are still formally quoted by designers today. For

8. In her 2020 publication *Design as an Attitude*, British design critic and author Alice Rawsthorn reintroduces this term by László Moholy-Nagy, referring to his 1947 book *Vision in Motion* in which he writes: “The idea of design and the profession of the designer has to be transformed from the notion of a specialist function into a generally valid attitude of resourcefulness and inventiveness which allows projects to be seen not in isolation but in relationship with the needs of the individual and the community.” From: László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, Chicago 1947, p. 42.

9. Volker Albus / Christian Borngräber, *Design Bilanz*, Cologne 1992, p. 7 (translation: CJ).

10. Ibid., p. 125 (translation: CJ).

the recently opened SSENSE flagship store in Montreal, for instance, David Chipperfield Architects designed an “immense concrete picnic table and benches in the top-floor café.”¹¹ The table’s position, usage, and seating arrangement are literally set in stone by the architect.

A more harmful kind of immobile and authoritarian table design became the focus of Sung Tieu’s recent art installations. At exhibitions in London and Berlin, the Vietnamese-born artist presented several ready-made table units designed for custodial environments.¹² The metal tables are bolted to the ground, each having four seats firmly attached to the base and without backrests. In an interview, Tieu points out the furniture’s oppressive effect: “the abuse that happens by the sheer design of [the tables], the generic and violent nature of the cold steel, the dull edges to prevent self-harm, the nonexistent screws that mean they can’t be taken apart ... I like to think about what happens when something like that arrives in the public sphere, especially when it comes with violence and distrust, as a rule, towards the humans that are supposed to use it.”¹³

■ *fig. 3*

The way we use tables today also reflects and amplifies the unpleasant yet inevitable behavioral changes re-

quired by COVID-19. This is illustrated not least by the many images in the news media that have been showing tables to visualize the social impact of the pandemic: generously sized conference tables of governments and large corporations only sparsely populated in order to fulfill the WHO safety distance guidelines; open plan office spaces with newly set up acrylic anti-spit protection separators between desks; seating areas of restaurants required to place tables as far apart from each other as possible; Parisian cafés with human-sized teddy bears seated at every other table to keep guests from getting too close to each other. Such images might slowly start disappearing as soon as the general public has become used to “The New Normal.” What will most likely remain unchanged until further notice, however, is that one has to think carefully who to sit at a table with.

11. <https://www.azuremagazine.com/article/retail-in-the-raw-david-chipperfield-canada/>

12. SungTieu’s exhibition “Loveless” was shown at Piper Keys, London from 24 January until 29 February 2019; her exhibition “Parkstück” was shown at Fragile, Berlin from 1 June until 28 June, 2019.

13. <http://moussemagazine.it/sung-tieu-maurin-dietrich-2019/>