Ehrlich Steinberg
5540 Santa Monica Blvd
Los Angeles, CA 90038
+1 (213) 584-1709
Wednesday - Saturday 11am-5pm

Tabletop Aesthetics
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by Sunny Xiang

Here lies a table.

It stretches between us, propping up our arms and slotting us in place. It is a barrier and a bridge, suspending us, connecting us. This table, this infrastructure of suspension, is also an incubator of suspense. Solidly, spindly, it hangs in the air.

The suspension bridge, a complex architecture stabilized by its own tension, is literary scholar Mark Seltzer's central metaphor for the self-stressed and self-supporting production of *suspense* in our unexceptionally precarious world. What Seltzer calls "the official world" is in suspense and in suspension to the extent that it is "gamelike, violent, yet extremely formal." Suspense, in this articulation, is both an overriding mood and an underlying structure, and it has three ideal-types: the game, the war, and the work of art.

As quotidian furniture rather than magisterial architecture, the folding table may be even more fitting than the suspension bridge for capturing the gamic, militaristic, and aesthetic aspects of a violently bureaucratic modernity. The official world, one could say, literally unfolds from the office table. This table, moreover, does not simply host games, battles, and art, but it contributes to the conflation of these ostensibly disparate genres of encounter. Bringing such grandiose worlding projects to the humble table results in a scalar paradox that is also an experiential paradox. Tables, by both gathering us and atomizing us, amplify the co-presence of intimacy and estrangement at the heart of suspense.

The table has long been a privileged object of philosophical inquiry. From Karl Marx to Jacques Derrida, Virginia Woolf to Sara Ahmed, deep thinkers have brought myriad household tables from the background into the foreground, with the aim of theorizing anew their respective social and phenomenological milieus.

Other tables are less domestic. During the Korean War armistice negotiations, rectangular conference tables were put in the service of reproducing geopolitical and ideological borders. In Kaesong, where the talks had begun in 1951, the Communists had assigned their delegates to the north side of the table, which was symbolically the victorious side. They had also cut down the legs of the chairs on the United Nations side so that the delegates facing each other would be of equal height. Today, in the Joint Security Area of the Korean Demilitarized Zone where diplomatic talks continue to take place, the conference tables still follow the 38th parallel, bisecting the peninsula into north and south.

Another allegorical table appears in the situation room of Stanley Kubric's 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove*. This extravagant centerpiece, covered with green felt, was famously designed to look like a poker table. The circular

structure ringed with lights is also evocative of a clock, and it is dramatically rimmed by a world map. The aesthetics of Kubric's iconic table underscore that suspense-ridden wars, games, and wargames possess both a temporal and a spatial dimension. Suspense is not just an acute, piercing sort of anxiety; it is also a habituation to a protracted experience of suspension, of enduring and waiting amidst overwhelming vastness, openness, and endlessness. The suspense of being suspended across time and space positions us in the middle of a dangling structure and an indefinite meanwhile. This suspended middle cues us to another notion of *table* as deferral. To wit: to *suspend* is to *table*.

Tables, then, are where our lives hang in the balance, where we sit down and carry on with the dim desire, if not the actual promise, of a determinate end. Such tables can be pushed against the wall or occupy center stage, saving space or taking space, allowing us to move more directly or forcing us to circle around. They ensnare and buoy us with their many animating tensions—between repose and purpose, antagonism and collaboration, desperation and delay, forgettability and indispensability.

Perhaps a simpler way of saying all this is that tables are, as the saying goes, part of the furniture. The Mojave poet Natalie Diaz writes, "I am compelled by the ways furniture shapes our imaginations of one another, how it can control our bodies, urge us to touch, to look, to disengage, to dream even." Furniture, Diaz proposes, "can prophesy our bodies into action or inaction, into rest or restlessness."

As part of the furniture, the tables of the negotiation room, the command room, the board room, and other kinds of war rooms endow *prophesy* and *action* with more import as well as more foreboding. These more formal, more official, more tactical, more impersonal tables not only give structure, shape, movement, and futurity to life and living, but they also function as the site and the infrastructure for imagining unimaginable violence.

Many of the warring and gaming tables discussed thus far have analogues in contemporary art: the office desk and desktop computer in Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme's *The Incidental Insurgents* (2014); the negotiation table in Yong Soon Min's *Still/Incessant* (2018/2024); the tables-turned-tablets in the circular opsroom of Catalina Ossa Holmgren and Enrique Rivera Gallardo's *Multinode Metagame* (2002-2007); and, of course, the interrogation table *qua* diplomatic table qua gambling table in TJ Shin's *Delta* (2026).

In such art installations, tabletop exercises are also tabletop aesthetics. That is, through the table, these works raise questions about how wargames relate to, appear in, and function as art. Their tables suspend us between enactment and reenactment, model and world, representation and reality, prompting us to ask: What exactly are we in the middle of?

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Perhaps in the middle of our table is a desktop or a tablet, and perhaps this configuration of tables serves to buttress, frame, and center yet another table. If physical tables tend to recede into the woodwork, this other table is a chart, grid, model, or diagram that stages its own retreat as sheer form and mere format. Its planar aesthetic usually involves straight lines and angular edges, with an interior populated by rows and columns, cells and blocks. The defining feature of this familiarly modular arrangement is unquestionably the data: the intricate patterns of lines and boxes are part of a highly formalized visual template for showcasing large quantities of information. Tables of this kind provide cognitive rather than physiological support. As data structures, they are designed to index relations, systemize knowledge, and deliver certainty.

In art, too, a table can function as an "information-processing system." This is the phrase that the cultural critic

Sianne Ngai uses to describe installation pieces featuring enumerative, encyclopedic, taxonomic, and permutational displays of heterogeneous and often remaindered quanta—animal hair, pennies, color fields, clippings, photos, random printouts. In Ngai's analysis, these tabulations of information do not bestow knowledge or mastery. Rather than make the data comprehensible, Ngai's case studies project an immense systematicity that stalls and obstructs interpretation, downgrading any kind of critical activity into a minimalist style of (non)response.

Ngai coins the term "stuplimity," a portmanteau combining the sublime with the stupefying, to theorize how an aesthetics of exhaustive tabulation acts on a viewer. Unlike the foldout table's mundanity, the tabular projection of a quantified totality has the feel of a monumental revelation. Yet rather than revealing information or securing knowledge, the pursuit of tabulation to its logical conclusion has the effect of both overwhelming and underwhelming the viewer, simultaneously attacking and dulling the senses.

One might be inclined to think of informatic tables as smooth, flat, and boxy, perhaps visually akin to what the art world calls panels and plates. But Ngai actually discusses the numerical stuplime through a clumpy idiom of agglutination. The building up of *this* and *that* generates a breaking down of *what* is *what*. The result is not only an uncertainty about the integrity and identity of one thing versus another, but also a more visceral jamming and slowing of a viewer's faculties. Incomprehension is too clean of a word to name an aesthetic experience so thick, mucky, and inertial; more appropriate would be congestion or constipation. This more excremental sense of stuckness brings stuplimity down from the pedestal of high art to the level of everyday experience. Indeed, even though it results from experimentation with extremes, stuplimity is, according to Ngai, ultimately more akin to "ordinary fatigue."

What's disorienting about stuplimity, then, is not just its fusing of the astonishing with the mind-numbing, but also the ambiguity it creates between the extraordinary and the everyday. These paradoxes explain why stuplimity appears so frequently in scholarship on the sensorial effects of military drones. Visual art, poetry, and video games are among the representational forms through which scholars have conceptualized a variant of tabletop aesthetics that they call "drone aesthetics." In invoking stuplimity, such scholars cast the drone operator not as a powerful paragon of the technological sublime but as a clerical worker consumed by tediously repetitive tasks. The crushing boredom and lethargy—the stuplimity—suffered by this all-too-human drone pilot makes the term *drone* seem rather propitious. It is perhaps not unlike how the term *fatigues* has traditionally referred to work uniforms (as opposed to combat uniforms), which U.S. military personnel wear while undertaking mindless, menial, and often domestic chores (known as "fatigue duty"). Such prosaic portrayals of soldierly life as bogged down by administrative and domestic labor tempers more heroic tales of military men. Through stuplime droning, the intrepid serviceman comes to seem more like a tired service *worker*.

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The ambient affects borne out by tables and tabulation give some coherence to the tenor and tone of a bewildering contemporary moment. For Ngai, stuplimity, alongside the other "ugly feelings" in her study, evidences the waning of affect and the weakening of subjectivity in an age of ever-latening-capitalism. Seltzer's suspended and officialized world offers another description of this same political economic reality, but with a greater emphasis on its professional-managerial aspects. So, while suspended office tables may seem more infrastructural, and stuplime data tables may seem more informational, suspense and stuplimity are both ambivalent and multivalent affects arising from a shared historical mood, one that is structured by an intensifying rhythm of crises and shocks.

Because *drone* is an affect that is also a military technology, this term adds another nuance to the periodization of late capitalism. That is, the droning qualities of tabletop aesthetics show that the political economy of a U.S.-

dominant global north is also and at the same time a military economy. Late capitalism is but another word for late colonialism. Many of us who live in the heart of empire have never experienced a combat zone. Yet we likely spend much of the day suspended at a table, staring at screens of windows, menus, tabs, pages, and charts. The computers we work at, the chairs we sit on, the grid design itself—these are all innovations of post-industrial warmaking. The escalation of new forms of warfare is always accompanied and always enabled by the routinization of new uses for military technologies. Suspense and stuplimity, in other words, reflect not just the bureaucratization but also the militarization of daily life.

What does it mean for contemporary art to share a common affective vocabulary with modern warfare and advanced capitalism at a time when empire seeks new guises? Yes, we can locate these different registers of power and modes of being at the same table, but clearly, they are not identical or analogous, so what exactly constitutes their relation to each other?

Although we cannot go through a single day without the impress of tables on our lives, it is only through an *aesthetic* ordering of experience that the feeling—or non-feeling—of ongoingness becomes intelligible in unexpected ways. Art represents, models, shapes, extends, and recreates material conditions, but it also differentiates itself by operating as a critical mode of attunement—even and especially when it forces us to confront the unavailability or inadequacy of a response. The overt content of this art may be repetitious rather than singular. It may be so committed to its own exhaustiveness that it becomes tired *and* tiring. Yet reencountering the world through this overextended art nevertheless incites a shift in attention, allowing us to perceive the durational heft of an acceleration that is also a slowing, to become aware of our absorption in an activity that is animated yet deadening.

And so: whether you are sitting at, reaching across, scrolling through, wishing for, or walking away from a table right now, may you let this table—this ordinary worlding device—hold you, even if only momentarily. May you feel this fleeting meanwhile as a nearness and a dwelling. May you linger, lean, and congregate. May you return.

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Sunny Xiang is a professor of English and American Studies at Yale who draws on wide-ranging aesthetic, cultural, literary, and documentary materials to study and teach U.S. military empire in Asia and the Pacific. Her research is specifically interested in how historical norms for perceiving race and gender have interacted with the sensory economy of colonial violence and militarized security. Her book *Tonal Intelligence: The Aesthetics of Asian Inscrutability During the Long Cold War* was published in 2020.