Daydreaming of Ping-Pong Publics – The Rhythms, Sociality & Play around a Table

How to cite:


For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© [not recorded]

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Version: Version of Record

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk
anarchosis
large-scale dome symbolising a borderless and transnational universe, peace in cyprus was demarcated by a line drawn on a map that would indicate two sides of a country, the so-called green line, drawn by major-general peter young using a green chinagraph pencil and partially in effect since 1963 due to the outbreak of intercommunal violence, became an indispensable feature, if not the status quo, of the island’s landscape from 1974 onwards, forming the un buffer zone.

unlike the dome’s utopian symbolism and somewhat problematic socio-political imagery of ‘world unity,’ the green line mirrored, perhaps the complex reality of what stands before us in shaping the world, in a world full of drawn lines that act as borders, raise walls, and cultivate perplexed human relationships, the very act of drawing inescapably orders the world full of drawn lines that act as borders, raise walls, and cultivate the complex reality of what stands before us in shaping the world. In a political imagery of ‘world unity,’ the Green Line mirrored, perhaps

the distinct, but still present, rhythms of the ‘other,’ the microcosm of cyprus projects ‘togetherness’ as the coexistence of simultaneous and multiple nested narratives and realities, where one side does not recognise the existence of the other, yet each remains incomplete in reminiscing or envisioning a different other ‘whole’.

on the one hand, nowadays it has become increasingly attainable to be a world citizen; intrinsically interconnected to each other through communication technologies that radically unthethered the constraints of physical distance, more so when the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 forced planes to touch the ground and isolated everyone within the confines of one’s home. while physically in one place, the ‘world citizen’ today can be virtually everywhere and present in more than two places at once, looking through lines, borders, and walls via screens. at the same time, physical presence, still prevails legal, socio-political, and financial protocols and contracts, with nation states raising tighter measures in controlling mobility, relentlessly increasing the number of virtually non-existent ‘citizens’ that remain ‘stateless,’ either as refugees or members of self-proclaimed nations, unofficially or illegally recognised by the ‘official’ global community. in the midst of them all, cyprus—a dot in the mediterranean—is currently witnessing them all, reminding us that no matter how small a place can be, ‘together,’ whether it is mutual or enforced, is inevitable.

like actors in the stage of the world, we ‘think no more of the audience than if it had never existed. imagine a huge wall across the front of the stage, separating you from the audience, and behave exactly as if the curtain had never risen’4 while, however, denis diderot when wrote that in 1758 was referring to the projection of a fourth, imaginary wall in a three-walled theatre to distance the actor from the audience, fuller was inspired to use the geometry of the circle for the development of the geodesic dome because of his childhood blindness. paralleling his blurry vision with a psychedelic effect, fuller described how lights and colours were projected in a way that allowed him to understand patterns of triangulation that are otherwise unavailable to people of regular vision.5 sometimes, breaking that fourth wall might feel futile; it is after all inherent in human’s nature to form boundaries. however, there is always the option to look through that wall in the same manner fuller embraced his blurry vision; a friction that enabled his intuitive, and creative mind to invent.

it is march 2021 as i am writing this text in london; and like many others, i feel drained from living through the third lock-down since the covid crisis began a year ago. sitting behind my desk, i’m listening to the song you’re not good enough by blood orange (2013) and whilst the guitar riff stops; footage from a bar is mixed in. i am hearing the sounds of a ping pong game being played, jazz music in the background, people chatting and someone shouting after a point has been scored. it makes me daydream of playing a game myself, it awakens a longing for being part of the kind of sociality that can be heard at the end of the song. as the excess death figures keep on rising it may feel wrong and actually slightly perverse to start thinking about a space full of strangers gathered around a table tennis table, playing, watching, joking, bumping into each other, experiencing gossip and fun. it isn’t enjoying an evening together. yet, it is all the more important to remind ourselves what it means to be alive, to evoke the excessive joy
that can be experienced in relating to others, a joy that is located in the playful practice itself, in the doing, and is less concerned with achieving predictable and commercial outcomes. This text reflects on several instances of publics being constituted around table tennis tables in different social-spatial settings by making use of personal memory, ethnographic observation, and a photobook. Whilst looking forward to a pandemic reconfigured world, I hope that my dwellings on daydreams of ping pong publics spark us to relearn how to relate to others in the city and recuperate a sense of play in our daily environments.

On my pre-pandemic daily route to the local supermarket, I used to pass by two table tennis tables situated in the large entrance hallway of the art school Central Saint Martins. Currently, due to the pandemic, all these tables have been removed[1]. During the weekends, a diverse group of players, mixed in both age and ethnicity, hanged out at these two tables. They dragged chairs along, brought food and non-alcoholic drinks, and played ping pong into the evening. Crowded around the table were spectators watching the ongoing game and waiting for their turn to play as well. Amongst the group, one table tennis player stood out. She played the game in earnest with her partner. She was there every week, sweaty armpits and richly filled lunch boxes. I also noticed that some regulars had started moving one of the tables into the corner at the entrance of the building. In that particular corner of the hallway, there is stronger artificial light, so the games could continue for longer in the evening. What is more, the ping pong ball when overhit or missed by one of the players does not travel into the endless void of the hallway, but bounces back on either the brick wall or the glass wall. Thus, these amateur players had appropriated these table tennis facilities, they had taken 'ownership' of this highly securitised and carefully managed space. After some months, I felt I had gotten to know this group of regular ping pong players intimately. My favourite familiar strangers are now missing in the pandemic urban landscape.

Strictly speaking the two table tennis tables were situated in a private space as the single landowner of this vast redevelopment just north of King's Cross station is 'King's Cross Central Limited Partnership' (2021b). The developer's website states 'table tennis is the thing - get your game on at king's cross' and continues by saying 'formerly the preserve of bored teens in youth clubs, table tennis couldn't be hotter in the capital right now' (2021a). In other words, the ping pong tables can be read as part of the developer's efforts to bring 'fun' into the newly developed area, seeking to maximise profit from a large-scale office, retail and housing development by alluding to the idea of the 'creative city'. King's Cross is a turbo charged redevelopment of a post-industrial landscape, in which once utilised warehouses got abandoned, were then temporarily used as clubs, and are now turned into a fashionable shopping arcade. Whilst celebrating its edgy past as funky clubbing district by displaying large photographs of dancing clubbers (see figure 2), it deliberately leaves out its local history of drug addiction, prostitution and homelessness, and its current 24-hour surveillance by a large team of security guards ensures a safe and sanitised play landscape. This area aims to accommodate the 'tech creatives' of Google, Facebook and closely aligned companies, and the art school forms a crucial part in the machinery of this creative city district. The introduction of the ping pong tables in the CSM hallway, then, are not too dissimilar to how tech companies such as Google infuse play into the work of 'Googlers', by including pianos, pool tables and ping pong tables into the working environment and disciplining workers to allocate 1/5 of their working time as they themselves see fit (Kavanagh 2011, 348–49). In doing so, play is put to work, it becomes a driver of economic profit, and the times and space of work and play become increasingly indistinguishable. To riff on the slogan 'shop where I danced', King's Cross offers its visitors spaces to 'work where I played'.

fig. 2 ‘shop where I danced’ wall poster at king’s cross coal drop yard shopping complex, london

on my pre-pandemic daily route to the local supermarket, i used to pass by two table tennis tables situated in the large entrance hallway of the art school central saint martins. currently, due to the pandemic, all these tables have been removed[1]. during the weekends, a diverse group of players, mixed in both age and ethnicity, hanged out at these two tables. they dragged chairs along, brought food and non-alcoholic drinks, and played ping pong into the evening. crowded around the table were spectators watching the ongoing game and waiting for their turn to play as well. amongst the group, one table tennis player stood out. she played the game in earnest with her partner. she was there every week, sweaty arm pits and richly filled lunch boxes. i also noticed that some regulars had started moving one of the tables into the corner at the entrance of the building. in that particular corner of the hallway, there is stronger artificial light, so the games could continue for longer in the evening. what is more, the ping poll ball when overhit or missed by one of the players does not travel into the endless void of the hallway, but bounces back on either the brick wall or the glass wall. thus, these amateur players had appropriated these table tennis facilities, they had taken 'ownership' of this highly securitised and carefully managed space. after some months, i felt i had gotten to know this group of regular ping pong players intimately. my favourite familiar strangers are now missing in the pandemic urban landscape.
however, this particular group of regular table tennis players escaped
the developer’s logic of a commercial productive play landscape. despite
the table tennis table’s commercial setting and the developer’s care-
ful management of the area, my observations suggest that these players
carved out a space to just have a game of ping pong, to simply enjoy the
game for what it is. although one could argue that by using the tables
these regulars fulfil the goals of the private developer by creating
a buzz, producing a fun ‘public’ space, this interpretation does not
fully capture what happens on the ground. first of all, most of these
ping pong players do not wear the avant-garde clothing of the csm fashion
students, nor do they correspond to the stereotypical creative tech
workers appearance, instead this is a different public, these players
seem to be ordinary londoners using the space available to them. sec-
ondly, these players do not just play one game of ping pong, but rather
spend the whole afternoon and evening around these tables. the ping pong
players’ duration[2] and focused occupation of the space contrasts
sharply with the more transient use of the king’s cross area. thirdly,
the ping pong players sweat, shout, argue, and chew on their
food, and thereby produce a distinct fleshy liveliness in this otherwise
empty space. thus, these ordinary londoners’ distinct ping pong prac-
tices challenge the deliberate playfulness of this area. their serious
play pushes the spatial, temporal and affective boundaries of the king’s
cross redevelopment, as evidenced by the developer’s efforts to contain
their play by reducing the number of tables from four to two.

furthermore, the king’s cross ping pong player’s enact a social atmos-
phere that does not confirm to the idea of a ‘networked sociality’ that
stahl (2008, 313) describes so well in his article on the round-the-table
ping pong country club events in berlin. at these club nights, a
heady mix of local artists and entrepreneurs mingle, listen to country
music, and whilst playing the sociable ping pong game they invest them-
selves in the promise of furthering their precarious careers by extend-
ing their professional network and perhaps even acquiring new commis-
sions in the middle of the night. this blurring of the distinctions
between play and work does not seem to correspond to what occurs amongst
the king’s cross ping pong players. the latter’s sociality appears not
to be informed by a desire to become part of an artistic scene in lon-
don, nor is this an explicit site for them to acquire new business con-
tacts whilst having ‘fun’. in contract, their sociality is more focused
on the game itself, on the joy of playing together. the king’s cross’
ping pong players effortlessly inhabit the contradictions of the ‘inner
street’, as the hallway is named by the developers, they negotiate the
simultaneity of being inside and outside, privately owned yet publicly
accessible, supervised 24 hours yet the wider public is invited to play
free at the tables. in doing so, the wider city seeps into the sani-
tised redeveloped space of king’s cross.

as i am not entirely immune to the lures of the redeveloped king’s cross,
i stumbled across the photobook ttp by photographer hayahisa tomiyasu
(2018) in one of the new shops. this book transported me to a public
park in leipzig and introduced me to entirely different set of rhythms
and play around a table tennis table. ttp stands for ‘tischtennisplatte’
(table tennis table) and whilst flicking through the photobook the reader
comes across a wide variety of appropriations of this one table tennis
table. you can see people sit, lounge, read a book, take selfies in

the middle of the night, sunbath, perform a downward dog, all those
activities on top of the table tennis table. also, you can observe dogs
and birds dwelling around the table, as well as large groups of children
gathering to conduct school exercises. the table also becomes part of an
elaborate tent construction to host a party in the park and is turned
into a desk to fix a kite. lastly, all sorts of ball games are performed
on this table tennis table in a park in leipzig, yet, and this is the
pun of the book, in 260 pages, not once people play a game of ping pong.
for five years long, tomiyasu observed the rhythms of social life around
the table by taking photographs from an identical angle from a window in
his flat[3], and he deliberately omits the actual game of ping pong. i
understand this as a provocation to be attentive towards the daily and
seasonal rhythms of use of public spaces as well as a recognition of the
ingenuity of people to appropriate, redeploy, play with such a simple
thing as a table tennis table.

as the successive lockdowns have deskilled us in having fun together,
shrunken the times and spaces to encounter others and negotiate
difference, blood orange’s song, the observations of the king’s cross’
ping pong players, and tomiyasu photobook, can hopefully help us to
remind ourselves what it can be like to socialise around a table, to
play with others. whilst navigating the challenges of the pandemic,
we can transport ourselves through engaging with cultural artefacts,
sharing of personal memories, and recalling spatial practices to relearn
how to inhabit our cities playfully.
daydreaming of ping-pong publics – the rhythms, sociality & play around a table
battista, kathy, brandon labelle, barbara penner, steve pile, and jane rendell. 2005. “exploring ‘an area of outstanding unnatural beauty’:
1. Hay, Deborah.
references
5. Spier, Steven.
3. Pakes, Anna
2. Lepecki, Andre.
134  bio notes
point', London :
It starts from any
of choreography -
‘William Forsythe
tion (1 Nov.2016).
Illustrated edi-
al Art'. Wesleyan
York: Routledge,
London and New
Critical Reader
Choreography: A
eds. Contemporary
Wildschut Liesbeth,
Butterworth Jo and
research', in

practical knowledge
choreography,
‘Knowing through
Patterns on the
experience of
5.  King’s Cross
4.  Kavanagh, Donncha.
3.  Duppen, Jan van.
2.  Blood Orange
1.  Battista, Kathy,
Play around a Table
Rhythms, Sociality &
Pong Publics – The
daydreaming of ping-
pong publics – the
rhythms, sociality &
play around a table
battista, kathy, brandon labelle, barbara penner, steve pile, and jane rendell. 2005. “exploring ‘an area of outstanding unnatural beauty’:
1. Hay, Deborah.
references
5. Spier, Steven.
3. Pakes, Anna
2. Lepecki, Andre.
134  bio notes
point', London :
It starts from any
of choreography -
‘William Forsythe
tion (1 Nov.2016).
Illustrated edi-
al Art'. Wesleyan
York: Routledge,
London and New
Critical Reader
Choreography: A
eds. Contemporary
Wildschut Liesbeth,
Butterworth Jo and
research', in

practical knowledge
choreography,
‘Knowing through
Patterns on the
experience of
5.  King’s Cross
4.  Kavanagh, Donncha.
3.  Duppen, Jan van.
2.  Blood Orange
1.  Battista, Kathy,
Play around a Table
Rhythms, Sociality &
Pong Publics – The

points of departure
2. chwałkowski, farrin. 2016. symbols in arts, religion and culture. newcastle upon tyne: cambridge scholars publishing.
3. berman, m., 1982. all that is solid melts into air : the experience of modernity. london: Verso.
4. "κάθε κήπος πρέπει να έχει το ιδιοχτήτη ψυχή του, και πρέπει νικάδε στοιχεία αιωνιότητας."
νά 'χει στοιχεία αιωνιότητας και κάθε έργο της γενιάς του ή κι ολόκληρης της ράτσας. γιατί το άτομο τί ξίλιν πρέπει να έχει; είναι κάτι εφαρμοστό, ο κήπος κάθως και κάθε έργο τέχνης, πρέπει νά 'χει στοιχεία αιωνιότητας και κάθε έργο της γενιάς του ή κι ολόκληρης της ράτσας. γιατί το άτομο τί ξίλιν πρέπει να έχει; είναι κάτι εφαρμοστό, ο κήπος κάθως και κάθε έργο τέχνης, πρέπει νά 'χει στοιχεία αιωνιότητας και κάθε έργο της γενιάς του ή κι ολόκληρης της ράτσας. γιατί το άτομο τί ξίλιν πρέπει να έχει; είναι κάτι εφαρμοστό, ο κήπος κάθως και κάθε έργο τέχνης, πρέπει νά 'χει στοιχεία αιωνιότητας και κάθε έργο της γενιάς του ή κι ολόκληρης της ράτσας. γιατί το άτομο τί ξίλιν πρέπει να έχει; είναι κάτι εφαρμοστό, ο κήπος κάθως και κάθε έργο τέχνης, πρέπει να έχει; είναι κάτι εφαρμοστό, ο κήπος κάθως και κάθε έργο τέχνης, πρέπει να έχει; είναι κάτι εφαρμοστό, ο κήπος κάθως και κάθε έργο τέχνης, πρέπει να έχει; είναι κάτι εφαρμοστό, ο κήπος κάθως και κάθε έργο τέχνης, πρέπει να έχει; είναι κάτι εφαρμοστό, ο κήπος κάθως και κάθε έργο τέχνης, πρέπει
9. derrida, specters of marx, p.79
10. derrida, specters of marx, p.78
an ‘earthwork’ learning centre/a challenge to transparency: upon an architectural object in nicosia
1. ‘earthwork’ library at university of cyprus, 2019.
yakety yak furniture blog, yaketyyakfurniture.com.
yakety yak
and translated by various. See quote in Denis Diderot, Oeuvres complètes iii (Paris: le club français du livre 1970), 453.

15. See for example, felicity c. scott, "acid visions." grey room 23 (winter 2006), 22-39.

1. Antonio Ragusa et al., A More-Than-Urban Politics of Urban Ecology and the Nature of Cities: Swyngedouw, In the Heynen, Maria Kaika, and translated by Liz Carey-Lee, Libbrecht (Paris: Le Club Français du Pong Publics, 2021). The on-line mapping platform 'pingengland' (2021) states that there are three tables. Yet, it can only remember seeing just two tables in the space. Thus, from 4 to 3 to 2 tables to none whatsoever, where is the fun in that? That might be an even longer history to the practicing of the game of table tennis in the king's cross area. The artist richard reinhardt included several ping pong tables in his exhibition 'an area of outstanding natural beauty', which responds to the upcoming changes to the area in 2002. Wentworth did this as he had a 'sense that this had once been a popular activity for locals and was no longer available' (battista et al. 2005, 460).

Daydreaming of ping-pong publics

1. There needed to be four tables, as indicated on the king's cross' website (king's cross central limited partnership 2021a). The online mapping platform 'pingengland' (2021) states that there are three tables. Yet, it can only remember seeing just two tables in the space. Thus, from 4 to 3 to 2 tables to none whatsoever, where is the fun in that? That might be an even longer history to the practicing of the game of table tennis in the king's cross area. The artist richard reinhardt included several ping pong tables in his exhibition 'an area of outstanding natural beauty', which responds to the upcoming changes to the area in 2002. Wentworth did this as he had a 'sense that this had once been a popular activity for locals and was no longer available' (battista et al. 2005, 460). The postsuburban world? An outline of a research agenda, environment and planning a 42, no. 2 (2010): 366-83.

2. There might be an even longer history to the practicing of the game of table tennis in the king's cross area. The artist richard reinhardt included several ping pong tables in his exhibition 'an area of outstanding natural beauty', which responds to the upcoming changes to the area in 2002. Wentworth did this as he had a 'sense that this had once been a popular activity for locals and was no longer available' (battista et al. 2005, 460).


7. Nicholas A. Phelps, Andrew M. Wood, and Nicholas A. Phelps, ‘shooting script’ of table tennis in the King’s Cross area. The artist richard reinhardt included several ping pong tables in his exhibition ‘an area of outstanding natural beauty’, which responds to the upcoming changes to the area in 2002. Wentworth did this as he had a ‘sense that this had once been a popular activity for locals and was no longer available’ (battista et al. 2005, 460). The postsuburban world? An outline of a research agenda, environment and planning a 42, no. 2 (2010): 366-83.

8. The artist richard reinhardt included several ping pong tables in his exhibition ‘an area of outstanding natural beauty’, which responds to the upcoming changes to the area in 2002. Wentworth did this as he had a ‘sense that this had once been a popular activity for locals and was no longer available’ (battista et al. 2005, 460). The postsuburban world? An outline of a research agenda, environment and planning a 42, no. 2 (2010): 366-83.

9. The artist richard reinhardt included several ping pong tables in his exhibition ‘an area of outstanding natural beauty’, which responds to the upcoming changes to the area in 2002. Wentworth did this as he had a ‘sense that this had once been a popular activity for locals and was no longer available’ (battista et al. 2005, 460). The postsuburban world? An outline of a research agenda, environment and planning a 42, no. 2 (2010): 366-83.


11. The artist richard reinhardt included several ping pong tables in his exhibition ‘an area of outstanding natural beauty’, which responds to the upcoming changes to the area in 2002. Wentworth did this as he had a ‘sense that this had once been a popular activity for locals and was no longer available’ (battista et al. 2005, 460). The postsuburban world? An outline of a research agenda, environment and planning a 42, no. 2 (2010): 366-83.

12. The artist richard reinhardt included several ping pong tables in his exhibition ‘an area of outstanding natural beauty’, which responds to the upcoming changes to the area in 2002. Wentworth did this as he had a ‘sense that this had once been a popular activity for locals and was no longer available’ (battista et al. 2005, 460). The postsuburban world? An outline of a research agenda, environment and planning a 42, no. 2 (2010): 366-83.

13. The artist richard reinhardt included several ping pong tables in his exhibition ‘an area of outstanding natural beauty’, which responds to the upcoming changes to the area in 2002. Wentworth did this as he had a ‘sense that this had once been a popular activity for locals and was no longer available’ (battista et al. 2005, 460). The postsuburban world? An outline of a research agenda, environment and planning a 42, no. 2 (2010): 366-83.

14. The artist richard reinhardt included several ping pong tables in his exhibition ‘an area of outstanding natural beauty’, which responds to the upcoming changes to the area in 2002. Wentworth did this as he had a ‘sense that this had once been a popular activity for locals and was no longer available’ (battista et al. 2005, 460). The postsuburban world? An outline of a research agenda, environment and planning a 42, no. 2 (2010): 366-83.

15. The artist richard reinhardt included several ping pong tables in his exhibition ‘an area of outstanding natural beauty’, which responds to the upcoming changes to the area in 2002. Wentworth did this as he had a ‘sense that this had once been a popular activity for locals and was no longer available’ (battista et al. 2005, 460). The postsuburban world? An outline of a research agenda, environment and planning a 42, no. 2 (2010): 366-83.