



The Review Issue

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EDITORIAL

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Anne-Marie Willis

The Review Issue: The Thing

Before introducing this issue, some updates:

- The question of design and homelessness (the theme of DPP no 3, 2006) will not go away. Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos reports that despite continuous official harassment, Coopamare, the recyclers collective run by homeless people is still resisting eviction and operating from its home under a viaduct in Sao Paulo. Apparently, late last year, Brazil's President visited Coopamare and a detailed case was put to him about the value of the resource conservation work being done there. Cecilia also reports on an international conference on homelessness she recently attended.
- The response to calls for papers for the 'Design, Ethics and Technology' issue which is being jointly edited by Will McNeill and Tony Fry has been very good. All invitations have now been issued and people are busy writing their papers for what promises to be a really substantial issue – due for publication July.

- Don't forget *Design Philosophy Papers Collection Two* (print) is now available. It comprises ten excellent essays on the themes of the social relations of design, the connections between design and ethics, the nature of consumer culture, information technology and architecture. It can be purchased online – see latest in print. There is also a special offer for purchasing Collections One and Two together).

The books selected for extensive consideration in this special Review Issue have been chosen because either they directly address design in significant ways, or where they don't directly address design, they deal with issues that are central to design itself. As each reviewer gives a thorough account of the scope of the books under review, I will not précis this here, but draw out only one theme that the books skirt in common – which is the question of The Thing, introduced here via an imaginary dialogue:

"You say that this issue of DPP is about things. That sounds incredibly vague – what type of things?"

"Well, everything. All kinds of things in fact."

"That's stupid. How can it be about everything? If it's about everything, then it's about nothing in particular!"

"No. It really is about all manner of things – in a really fundamental way. It's about what constitutes a thing in the first place."

"But a thing is just an object, isn't it?"

"No, it can be anything."

"You've proved my point again ... everything and nothing!"

"While I don't have at my fingertips a definitive definition of 'a thing', after all, it's a question that has plagued philosophers for centuries – I do know that things can't be taken for granted. We need to remain open minded about what things are. Maybe a thing is just a presence – but not necessarily a material presence. A thing can be a matter of concern. A thing is a specificity. It has a particular character that may or may not be obvious. In fact the obviousness of some thing – like its dictionary-definition or its materiality or its visibility – may not be what 'it's really about' at all – these might obscure what it is as a thing, they might conceal 'the thing itself'.

"But what's the point about talking about things in this abstract way? Isn't it a question of just focussing on the things that are important, or the things that interest you?"

"Yes, but if you only ever do this, you're only ever likely to get half the story or see half the picture – take your pick – literary or visual metaphor. Or to invoke a different sensory mode, you're

like a wealthy diner in very expensive restaurant where you've got a choice from a vast menu of delectable delights, but you know absolutely nothing about food preparation, ingredients or cooking. With this limited knowledge all the choices on the menu are but a range of variously flavoured and textured substances. Well, that's what it's like if you only ever think with ready-made concepts; if you never go to the trouble of finding out how this or that concept or category arrived as such in the first place. Thus it is with the concept of a 'thing'. Thus it is with everything!"

Cameron Tonkinwise reviews Bruce Sterling's *Shaping Things*, initially finding it to be an insightful text on the life and times of designed things. Then on closer examination, he finds Sterling's historical sensibility wanting. Reflecting on using *Shaping Things* as a text for design students, he asks questions about the meaning of history in this terminal era or rather, this era of terminations, and what sense of history might be retrievable for the 'post generations'.

Tony Fry identifies the recent emergence of a concern with things across a variety of recent connected and unconnected intellectual projects – some of which address design, others which remain oblivious to it. He names this new tendency, 'object-thing philosophy' and discusses how it is played out differently in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel's massive exhibition/book project *Making Things Public*, Peter Paul Verbeek's *What Things Do* and Graham Harman's philosophy/philosophical commentary *Tool-being and Guerrilla Metaphysics*. Across the texts what the authors count as things varies considerably – from the concrete designed artefacts that preoccupy Verbeek through to Latour and Weibel's re-assertion of an ancient meaning of things as 'matters of concern', and thus not at all material, but nevertheless *actants* (to borrow Latour's term) in the unfolding drama (or interminable soap opera?) of humanity. Of particular interest to Fry is what seems like a post-subjective(ist) or at least, certainly post-cartesian move to grant things an independent status and to suggest that things are not always under our control, that they take on a life of their own, and as DPP continues to emphasise, that things make us as much as we make things. This realisation, that we often characterise in DPP as 'the designing of the designed', is now emerging in different traditions of thought and different contemporary contexts. Of these texts, Tony Fry asks questions. How adequate are they philosophically? Are they sufficiently cognisant of design? What is their politics in the conjuncture of now, i.e., that tipping point between unsustainability and either an immanent age of sustainment or total collapse?

While the book **Gavin Sade** reviews, Jonas Löwgren & Erik Stolterman's *Thoughtful Interaction Design*, doesn't address 'the nature of things' in the abstract, it does make claims about the status of information technology as "a material without qualities",

which suggests that it is not ‘a thing’ in the same way as the material objects that result from industrial design or architecture are. But, according to Gavin Sade, important things (i.e., things as matters of concern) are elided in over-emphasising the immateriality of IT – which, viewed relationally, is hardly immaterial at all.

The first book reviewed by myself, *Culture in Practice* is a collection of essays by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins written over thirty years, in which the question of material culture figures prominently, and indeed material things are frequently given starring roles in the dramas of culture and of cultural exchange. While the object-thing is not singled out for special attention, it is by implication located in an extremely coherent and highly compelling schema, which is Sahlins theorisation of the nature of, and relationships between, culture, change, agency and individuals. And “for something completely different” Sahlins’ thoughtful tome is contrasted with the hype of things and the hyped object-thing that is Bruce Mau et al’s *Massive Change*. Is it just ‘eye-candy’ with a whiff of burnt-out social consciousness, or might it have something more to offer?

Anne-Marie Willis