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EDITORIAL

De/Re/Materialisation (Contra-Futures) – Take Two

Anne-Marie Willis

This issue of *Design Philosophy Papers* picks up and develops the theme of De/re/materialisation introduced in Issue 3, 2004.

We present two papers – by **Johan Redström** and **Wolfgang Jonas**, plus the introduction to a forthcoming book, *Ecologies of Steel*, by myself and Tony Fry. Additionally, papers from the previous ‘DeMat’ issue – by Albert Borgmann, Cameron Tonkinwise and Tony Fry – are re-run. This is to enable all readers to better follow the debate.

Also making a repeat appearance in this issue are Tony Fry’s ‘Design Intelligence’ and ‘Elimination by Design’ essays. We are aware that many readers tried to access these from linked references in the last issue, but the links didn’t work. We apologise for frustration produced! The problem has been fixed now. More generally, we are adopting the practice of including links to earlier papers where relevant. This way, non-subscribers can follow the development of some of our themes. But it is much more

advantageous to become a subscriber – that way you can access all back issues whenever you want. Rates are reasonable, and there are other benefits, as you can find out.

Returning to the theme: **De/re/materialisation**. This awkward tag is a way of thinking and signalling important technological shifts.

It is now pretty much a cliché to point out that information technology has not delivered what some of its early proponents hoped for – dematerialisation manifested as lower impact, less resource intensive ways of living and working.

There's a lot of activity going on in the immateriality of electronic space: products are created and marketed; education and training are delivered; diversions are discovered; money changes hands; social networks are formed; information on just about anything can be found. At the same time, in physical space, raw materials continue to be exploited, the volume of manufactured goods increases unabated, waste still piles up, greenhouse gas emissions accelerate, once-pristine environments and the unique species that inhabit them continue to shrink.

While initially, information technology seemed to offer obvious opportunities for impact reduction (e.g., less need to travel, less need for paper) it in fact has provided endless possibilities for driving *new* forms of material throughput. This is particularly so in areas like just-in-time inventory control, automated production and electronic marketing. Another instance is the rise and mutation of the so-called peripherals of IT's immaterial core – consider the evolution of desktop printing, in which there has been continuous 'upping of the ante' – *from* legible text for business *to* the 'printed aesthetic' of word processing becoming the unspoken standard *to* full colour photographically illustrated reports now churned out by everyone from CEOs to school children.

Not only have the technologies of electronic data production and transmission not resulted in lighter environmental footprints, they are now also diminishing the richness and variety of materiality. Eyes and fingertips are working full time while whole-bodies languish. In so many occupations and everyday life, less and less physical effort is required, and increasingly, tactile engagement is with non-resistant, characterless materials designed to withdraw in use. Creeping sensory deprivation accompanies the expansion of screen and touchpad-mediated experience, this prompting some to call for 'rematerialisation'.

To what extent can these new deficiencies be blamed on the nature of these technologies? Phenomenologically, at the coal(inter)face, the answer is: entirely! One can only interact with technological devices on their own terms. They carry with them their own distinctive mode of being, which is inextricably bound up with the specifics of their functioning – in Heideggerian terms their nature is 'in order to', i.e., 'to be' pure instrumentality. According to **Johan Redström**, it

doesn't have to be this way – for example, there's nothing inherent in digital information that requires it to be shown on a screen. He argues that the design of IT products is much too heavily focused on narrowly defined functions. Paralleling Cameron Tonkinwise's call for designers to design unfinished things,¹ Redström wants to de-emphasise use and instrumental functionality; he wants to forget, for the moment at least, that innocuous sounding, but in fact very sly idea of 'user friendliness'.² Instead, he advocates open-ended design concepts for 'computational things' and suggests that contemporary technologies be treated as raw materials (like steel, timber or textiles) with which to design.

While Redström considers 'the materiality of the immaterial', **Wolfgang Jonas** proposes another apparent contradiction – seeking dematerialisation via a focus on the body and corporeality. To paraphrase (and parody) his argument: the story of humankind is a hypertellic tragedy of a species whose brain grew too big for its own (and much else of the planet's) good. *Homo sapiens*, the victim of a fatal mutation, woke up one day to discover the capacity for memory and imagination, and with it, a sense of time, of future, of death. There followed a rising tide of anxiety that could only be assuaged by feverish appropriation of what was 'out there', seeking to grasp and shape it according to the particularities of the human sensory-cognitive apparatus. In the process – which is human history – much of what was 'out there' has been destroyed or irrevocably transformed.

Jonas's message: let's stop all this destructive lumbering around in the dark; the mystery lies within – in the endless loop (which could be described otherwise as a hermeneutic circling) between the "body's *reality*" and "the *virtuality* of the operations of consciousness". His provocation: designers should go with the flow of emergent "anthropo-technologies" and "cross the border and practise design inside of the human body." Clearly this a proposition intended to shock. To this, could be added a counter-provocation: it's too late; others who do not even know that they are designers are already there doing the designing. What could professional designers, constituted as they are, as service-providers, have to offer anyway? Jonas suggests that designers could contribute by creating design scenarios (*a la* Manzini)³ that are alert to these emergent biotech contexts. Another approach is to invert this (and this comment also applies to Redström's equally conventional disciplinary positioning of design), by seeking to bring the meta-designing already going on into view, this, towards the task of redesigning design, rather than endlessly trying to find a cosy niche for designers-as-they-currently-constituted to occupy in brave new worlds.

Meta-designing is implicit in the third paper, by **Tony Fry** and myself – which is the introduction to a book, *Ecologies of Steel*. The book (which will be available from July) is a five thousand year

cultural history of a material exploring *what steel has designed* as well as *what has been designed with steel*. The material itself, its raw materials, changing manufacturing processes, applications, its bodies of knowledge, labour and skill, its relation to other materials and technologies – all this and much more is viewed within the frames of design and ecologies.

While Jonas and Redström's papers invoke the future, it might seem that *Ecologies of Steel* looks backwards. But, as is increasingly being recognised – cf. the attention being received by Jared Diamond's latest book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*, there is much to be learnt from the ways in which earlier civilisations dealt with (or didn't deal with) biophysical crises which were often of their own making. Similarly, within what usually gets presented as a smooth 'evolutionary' progression of technological development, there are many uncharted highways and byways, twists, turns and opportunities that were not taken up at the time, and which now invite re-examination in the light of contemporary circumstances. The history of iron and steel is full of such possibilities.

Anne-Marie Willis

Notes

1. Cameron Tonkinwise 'Is Design Finished? dematerialisation & changing things' first published *Design Philosophy Papers* no 3, 2004.
2. See editorial 'User-centred design' *Design Philosophy Papers*, no 1, 2004.
3. See previous issue of *Design Philosophy Papers* (no 1, 2005) especially Interview with Ezio Manzini and Anne-Marie Willis 'Scenarios, Futures and Design'; also see Manzini 'Scenarios of Sustainable Wellbeing' in the first issue of DPP (no 1, 2003).