Self, World, Agency

Anne-Marie Willis

EDITORIAL

Self, World, Agency

Anne-Marie Willis

Who Acts for Sustainment?

This question could mean several things. It might be a political question – who is prepared to stand up and be counted? Or it could be sociological – which social groups are committed to sustainment, what motivates them, how influential are they, and so on?

The question is however, being posed in another way. It seeks to push things further back, to a more fundamental level, going to the 'what' of the 'who'. Who is it that acts? Is there a who at all or are human actions so absolutely enmeshed in larger systems that the idea of a freely choosing self is no more than a delusional conceit? Certainly, after several decades of deconstruction of many concepts, not least, the 'unitary self' one might be inclined to answer 'yes'. Media and marketplace culture might also answer 'yes', but add, 'Who cares? Identities are fluid, try them on, try them out, have fun!' And thus people are addressed as home-makers, car-owners, food-lovers, holiday-makers, voters, fashion-wearers and so on. Then there are other voices appealing to 'our better selves' saying 'be responsible, recycle, save water, switch off the lights'. As de-centred subjects, we can hear all the calls,

and respond to them - never mind the contradictions piling up in front of us as we are propelled forward with our backs to the future like Benjamin's famous angel of history.

The three papers presented here all touch on questions of self, agency and world. The relationship between these three categories is becoming increasingly urgent, given the imperative to counter unsustainability. While urgent, it is also more problematic to address, given the intertwined nature of self and world. Human beings make artefacts, technologies, systems of exchange and belief, laws and so on – in other words – worlds. We dwell in these made worlds, they become our reality, and come to make us who and what we are. Of course it's not total determinism, but a dynamic process, though not one driven by a unitary principle like evolution, progress or development; rather, it is an undirected unfolding as things that have been put in place play themselves out – colliding, combining, conflicting, morphing into new things, and so on. And as worlds have become more complex, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate out human and non-human agency. Where the human ends and technology begins is becoming less and less clear.

Henrik Enquist's paper *'A Socio-Material Ecology of the Distributed Self'* begins from a questioning of the unitary self and draws on Actor Network Theory as developed by Bruno Latour and others. The paper seeks an appropriate way to understand human-technology interactions, first, by reviewing various metaphors of technology: as tool, as text, as system and as ecology. Then Enquist sees how far the ecology metaphor can be pushed in a specific instance – the trial of a new portable information storage/retrieval device ('the memory stone') designed for pregnant women as they move from one specialist to another in a very well-resourced health care system (the kind that, globally, only a minority of women have access to). The interest is in what effects this 'transitional object' might have on the interactions between experts and non-experts (such as the pregnant women and their partners) and on women's self-understanding, and the extent to which a digital artefact can become an integral part of the self. It might seem bizarre that a sophisticated digital device is insinuated into the seemingly natural events of pregnancy and birth. Yet maybe it is not so strange – as every culture has thoroughly de-naturalised that most basic biological mechanism of its own continuity – whether via ritual, myth, science, technology.

Carleton Christensen in '*Redirecting Affective Dispositions: How Philosophy Can Contribute to Eco-Political Thinking*' discusses an ecological self of a very different kind. His argument is that the contribution philosophy can make to eco-political thinking is not where it is conventionally assumed to be – environmental ethics, 'deep' and 'shallow' ecology, etc. In fact these have had very little influence. He explores instead, a less obvious, but more valuable way that philosophy can contribute to thinking the "deep

and intransigent problems of unsustainability", and this is by exposing assumptions about the nature of the self and the motivations of human behaviour that underlie popular critiques of 'consumerism' and proffered 'sustainability solutions'. In doing this, he considers the possibilities and the limitations of Elizabeth Shove's socio-historical accounts of how habits and sensibilities are shaped by technologies and designed things. He is interested in exploring the spaces between on the one hand, unsustainability as something structured, systemic, seemingly immovable and on the other, conceptions of self, world and agency that are still operative, but have become obscured, conceptions that could be amplified to act towards sustainment.

Tiiu Poldma's paper 'Dwelling Futures and Lived Experiences: Transforming Interior Spaces' is an attempt to rethink the practice of interior design, a rethinking which requires a realignment of attachments, sensibilities and priorities, as much as taking on new approaches to design. This is a call to interior designers to fundamentally shift their practice, moving away from the pre-occupation with visual aesthetics – the interior as stage set – and towards enabling the practices of everyday living. In developing the argument, the paper outlines a phenomenological approach, including discussion of Heidegger on dwelling and reconsideration of ideas of home and homelessness.

The 'we' evoked in debates about sustainability is so often assumed as western, affluent and urban. Poldma draws attention to the vast gulf between the 'we' – in this case, educated interior designers – and the 'who' that should be served by interior designers, but aren't – the homeless, the dispossessed and the recipients of welfare who are 'provided for' by the state in ways (and with facilities) that often diminish their capacity to shape their own lives.

If interior designers were to rethink and re-skill so as to become designers of environments that facilitate 'living well', they might find their own working lives transformed as much as the spaces on which they work.

We would like to welcome Karen Jaschke as a new member of DPP's Editorial Advisory Board. Karen is a Senior Lecturer in Architectural History and Theory at the School of Art and Design, University of Brighton in the UK. She is also one of the co-editors (along with Paul Denison, University of Teeside, UK and Tara Andrews, University of Western Sydney, Australia) of one of an upcoming DPP on Design History Futures: Sustaining What? CFPs nearly closed, but you still might have time.

Anne-Marie Willis
November 2008