The Impossible: The Voice of Sustainment

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Tony Fry has been working on design philosophy since the 1970s and specifically on the relation between design, unsustainability and sustainment for the last decade, this is seen especially in his book *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* (1999).

We, that is the total human race, face the impossible.

Without dragging out what is an almost endless stream of statistics the situation shapes-up like this:

The number of human beings on the planet ever increases, and the more of us there are the faster the rate the human population grows. This, however, is not the problem. The way of life of the populations of advanced industrial countries is increasingly unsustainable – notwithstanding the growth of immaterial information based technologies – the greenhouse emissions generated, the reduction in biodiversity, the western diet, the mode of agricultural production, the volume of waste generated, and so on – just cannot continue without extremely serious environmental consequences. Additionally, this way of life is the global model that everyone wants to emulate. But again this is not the problem.

To make the problem appear, we have to look to ourselves – not just individually or collectively but essentially.

Our inscribed mode of 'being-in-the-world' (the designing of the worlds we humans have designed and made), in its historicity (un-narrated history), has

designed the self-centred way we are (the specificity of our anthropocentrism). This is what is at the core of our defuturing unsustainability. It is this situation that 'allows' the privileged to disavow what they 'know' (the negative ecological consequences of their impacts) and displace problems of unsustainability by positing them in 'the environment'. Meanwhile, the desire to become the privileged overrides any residual sustaining knowledge that others live by.

Notwithstanding this bleak analysis, as it recedes into a past and then returns to us from the future, the history of humanity is a history of the realisation of the impossible – on the land and sea, in the air and space, but above all in spirit.

The impossibility is transforming what 'we' are. Counter to technology designing 'us' as 'the inhuman' 'we' need to become another being, a ne(w)oman, a sustaining being. This transformation is not just a matter of acquiring a new consciousness via an other thinking (philosophical dwelling), although a new consciousness is a project to pursue. Nor is it a matter of creating another material and symbolic world of artifice, although if we are to redesign the world that designs us this is a project to pursue. Rather, it is a question of thinking and making reflectively and dialogically – 'we' need to remake our selves by both making as we think and thinking as we make (we have to return to thinking, embrace the complexity and then go beyond the divisions of poiesis, praxis and phronesis) – a self and world of care.

So the demand to realise the impossible is an overcoming of the limits of mind, imagination and action. The question here is not where to start, because the start has been made. 'We' are moving from the empty rhetoric of sustainability to an ontology of sustainment.*

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* [A current project that exemplifies this is Sustainable Everyday discussed by Ezio Manzini and François Jegou – Ed.]