



Touching the Wall of Silence: The Voice of Sustainment

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To cite this article: Tony Fry (2003) Touching the Wall of Silence: The Voice of Sustainment, Design Philosophy Papers, 1:3, 137-140

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871303X13965299301993>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



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The Voice of Sustainment

Tony Fry

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).

The quiet of a still night, deafness, the withholding of speech, the noiselessness of a sound-insulated space, idle chatter that says nothing – silence comes in many guises. The kind of silence to be considered here cannot be registered by any scientific measuring instrument – it is not of physics. Rather it is that politico-cultural silence that is becoming, or perhaps already is, a significant characteristic of the cultural fabric of social democratic nations.

Consideration of the topic has been prompted by the lack of debate so far engendered by the ‘hot debate’ section of this publication. A discovery that there are a few responses in the pipeline would suggest that it is premature to draw negative conclusions. However, from initial thoughts, the issue of thinking silence has taken on a much wider significance. The more it, and reflection upon the exposure of meeting silence, has been considered, the more it seemed worth putting up for discussion. Certainly the kinds of changes essential for the advancement of sustainment by design demands voices that contest the status quo and vigorously argue for viable alternatives. This means that the wall of silence has to be broken down.

A variety of experiences over several years seem to merge. For instance: letters on significant issues to corporations or government departments being ignored or replied to with form content; terminating discussion and exchange as a way to deal with differences; polite indifference to the presentation of unconventional ideas; and, constructive criticism prompting a closing-down of dialogue rather than stimulating it.

Where does this culture of silence come from? Obviously, there is not just one answer. The 'wall of silence' is built by the convergence of diverse forces.

It's clear that the public mind has progressively undergone a process of closure as the unfreedoms of 'free societies' have increased. Contrary to the volume of shrill rhetoric on freedom coming from the 'free world', actual freedoms continue to disappear. The most recent instance is the way the threat of terrorism is mobilised to reduce civil liberties. More general, structural and less visible are those diminishment of freedoms resulting from, for example, the corporatisation of government (with an associated erosion of differences in political ideologies and a ceding of power to economic instruments), the rise of public utility and software manufacturer monopolies, the hegemony of consumerism, and those exclusions made when designing the operative spheres of many technologies.

While forms of political resistance to these developments do occur they are increasingly gestural (as in the anti-globalisation movement) and devoid of the means to deliver real alternatives. Effectively, actual spaces of authentic democratic resistance are evaporating, and those voices that do articulate other world-views are silenced by having their positions of speech delegitimised. To give a specific example – the language and practices of many once radical non-government environmental organisations are now indistinguishable from government, this partly because a culture of conformism has been created by increasing dependence on government funding leading to policy compliance. Other factors are: an overlapping of NGO and government employment careerism; and token incorporation of environmental factors into the economic mainstream. Moreover, and more generally, there are now several generations of students who have passed through universities that have been instrumentalised by economic rationalist managerialism. Quite simply, large numbers of students undertake vocational courses and are thus focused on job prospects. They thus keep their heads down, tails up and lips buttoned. This situation has arrived because such forms of instrumental education have become dominant in the tertiary sector. Correspondingly, the education sector has been stripped of disciplines that advance critical theory and thinking. The remaining rump of the humanities 'survives' by a degeneration of its curriculum content to 'educational entertainment' – evidenced in the uncritical embracing of popular

culture by cultural studies; history becoming more preoccupied with narrativising historical trivia; the displacement of English by self-expressive 'creative writing'; pop-philosophy striving to make philosophy 'sexy'.

Obviously the structural changes in universities created by an ideological union of government and economic forces have been made possible by the complicity and silence of many academics. Rather than using their tenure to fight to preserve 'academic freedom' many simply reduce tenure to job security. Moreover, the quietism of academic careerists is corrosive, reducing the capability of the kinds of knowledge under attack to be used to make sense of, cope with and critically transform the unsustainable qualities of the contemporary world. Even more serious, is the reduction in the capability of universities to be able to produce non-technocratic new knowledge and transformative cultural ideas that could enable the contemplation and creation of affirmative and sustaining cultural futures. In spite of these circumstances, the need for designers and thinkers to 'design and think otherwise' becomes ever more essential.

The silence created by the mobilisation of self-interest against collective needs has been rife in universities and society at large. This development has been helped in significant part by the weakening of labour organisations and the introduction of quasi-Taylorist practices (in universities via the likes of user/student satisfaction surveys). Management consultants have played a big part in the inculcation of compliance in the corporate and educational sectors. The other imposed orthodoxy that still touches all educational institutions, as well as the media, is what could be called 'unbalanced neutralism'. Here, a line is drawn to divide positions in order to establish a so-called balanced view. However, this line-drawing excludes anything that is not immediately on one side or another. This links to a violence of pluralism, whereby the pluralist decides what is to be included or excluded from the plural mix. Here what is silenced is a healthy acknowledgement of the basis of bias – that is, the basis of having a set of values to which one is committed that underpins positions one adopts.

So much of what contemporary cultures have emplaced in seemly 'soft and reasonable' language turns on the inculcation of self-censorship. At best this is manifest in saying nothing because it might cause offence. At worst it is evident in the fact that there are now many views that simply cannot be spoken. This silence spans critical questioning in areas like political theory, sexuality and race. What such silencing adds up to is the repressive intolerance of regimes of political correctness. This mind-set folds into earlier remarks made on students because frighteningly 'political correctness' arrives to configure a disposition toward learning that is put in place at the primary school level. The historico-cultural tropes carried by discourses of correctness not only displace

historical and critical inquiry but also repress the nurturing of a critical facility of mind.

Alongside the pragmatic direction of a 'wall of silence' there has also been the accompanying cultural phenomenon of a certain style of disinterest that stems from the low-level radiant effect of postmodernism upon youth culture. To be animated, vocal and above all, committed to a position, has for some time now been deemed uncool. This disposition while not that of all young people has been widespread across most industrialised nations. Moreover, it has bled into the adult cultures of privilege. Here cool moves to cold. A graphic example of this was the recent publication in a European newspaper of a photo of the corpse of an African 'illegal immigrant' washed up on a Portuguese beach where two young sunbathers relaxed oblivious.

To acquire a grasp of the significance of design, in a world that so often negates futures by design, requires encouraging and embracing voices that speak of design in extremely critical and often new ways. These voices cannot arrive without debate. This debate requires investing in the making of cultures able to embrace positive forms of silence, while challenging the proliferation of those that are negative. The point is not to say this but to do it.