Book Review

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In 1999, after many attempts, Tony Fry interested a publisher in *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing.* After being out of print for about ten years, that volume has been revived with a slightly different title and an introductory essay by Clive Dilnot. The initial publication prompted *Design Issues* (Summer 2001) to solicit a review from Chris Sherwin, who declared *A New Design Philosophy* to be "highly original and unique." Sherwin concluded his comments with some reservations about omissions and style, yet his knowledge of "the new design philosophy" makes him a candidate for consideration as an implementer of it. As the director of reboot innovation, a British company that claims to "take sustainable innovation to this next level [a green, fair and prosperous world],"[1] Sherwin represents the design profession's willingness and/or ability to fully embrace Fry's philosophy and its urgency. First, however, the book itself.

Except for its absence of recent phenomena—for example, Wikipedia, smartphones, social media, Black Lives Matter, Trumpism, the COVID-19 pandemic, and, as Dilnot points out, the word *anthropocene—Defuturing* is even more relevant today. This is because, as Fry states in his preface to this edition, "world-destructive conditions are now becoming ever more critical as enviro-climatic and geopolitical dangers converge" (xxiv). The litany of dangers is omnipresent and their severity is increasing; the majority of commentators lay blame on government or corporations or cyclical patterns in nature. By contrast, Fry goes to the root cause of these dangers, which is humans and the worldview that we in the West are born into: anthropocentrism. He pulls no punches with regard to humans' culpability

for current circumstances and their inevitable, if unchecked, outcome: "the history of humanity tells us that we are a world-ending animal" (174). Fry admonishes that we must take responsibility for our world unmaking by placing sustain-ability[2] at the forefront of our conduct, not just personally but through Design.

The capitalization of design represents a meta-view: design's objects (cities, buildings, products, systems), agency (persons and tools like drawings or software), and processes (ongoing consequences of what is designed) as they combine and exist in relation to each other, the planet, and its occupants (5). Although *Defuturing* is not a design history, Fry uses US history to further his argument about Design. American inventors, designers, and craftsmen of technology—railways and their networks; guns that predicated slaughter of man and animal; farm machinery clearing vast acreages; the Model T, Ford production line, and Taylorism—transformed not only the United States but "the economic, cultural and social environment of the entire modern world" (67). Productivism, endemic to the United States, proliferated by means of education and emulation, becoming the hegemonic mode of being, one that took advantage of whatever resources were at hand. At the same time, unsustainability and defuturing increased exponentially to ensure what was deemed as progress.

Fry contends that the crisis of the crisis of defuturing, the condition whereby we are perpetuating circumstances that annihilate the future, is that so few people realize it. Predominantly, unsustainability is the norm, humanity's place at the center of the universe is taken for granted, and technology is unquestioned. Rather than give in to nihilism, this dystopia presents an opportunity to increase knowledge, particularly with respect to design: "Design has to be turned (by becoming informed by defuturing) from being the unwitting tool of unsustainability to become the means of making the sustainments that make time, and so serve futuring" (62). Fry points out that learning sustain-ability is not a new concept but originates with Aristotle, who called it *phronésis*, which is "action, theory and practice function[ing] together with foresight" (31). Ancient philosophy and

Indigenous populations knew about the necessity of stewardship, yet their wisdom was or is dismissed or undermined by colonization, globalization, the capitalist ethic, and enchantment with "new."

Fry devotes two chapters to technocentricity and the televisual. He states: "Historically, technology has been dominantly projected as a human-directed tool, created to tame, exploit or re-fashion 'nature.' What is now becoming clearer is that it also acts to re-shape its maker and user as much as, and perhaps more than that which it is presented as making" (21). Reenter Chris Sherwin. His firm designed the Fairphone, "the world's most sustainable smartphone."[3] Fairphone attests to reducing e-waste, being long-lasting and repairable, made of ethically obtained and produced materials, and caring about people. Fair enough! But what about questioning the root of the brief: does the planet need another smartphone? Does perpetuating televisual control of humanity indicate genuine care about people? As Fry relates with a medical analogy, addressing the symptoms instead of the underlying problem is not sustain-able. In the case of the Fairphone, the designer considered unfair manufacturing and maintenance but neglected the sustain-ability of telecommunication and its inherent problems of surveillance, identity theft, invasion of privacy, and so on.

Another Sherwin design, Winnow Vision, is an AI-supported scale for commercial kitchens.[4] Its manufacturer claims that it "surpasses human levels of accuracy in identifying food waste," resulting in significant reductions in food costs and increased returns on investment. Sustainability in this scenario means sustaining the reduction in food waste, not whether the product itself is sustain-able. Such a device focuses on management control of costs and returns and neglects the education of food workers, so that when the inevitable brown- or black-outs occur, they are handicapped by lack of training. This reliance on technology tries to overcome human factors instead of re-viewing the environment of commercial kitchens, with their social, cultural, economic, and political elements.

Undoubtedly Sherwin has to make a living, and he is attempting "active engagement" to educate his clients through innovative design.[5] But I query whether he—like the vast majority of designers and design institutions—fully understands defuturing, judging by his choice of a "brilliant quote":[6] "Sustainability is not like selling soap, it's more like getting people to use soap in the first place."[7] No! Sustainability begins with the ethos around the body and cleanliness and the need for soap at all.[8]

Defuturing is dense in parts. Fry has written, as Dilnot's introduction explains, a design philosophy: "a proposition about design *and about thought* in the strongest sense . . . a new philosophy of existence and of acting in relation to new conditions of existence" (xvi). Fry justifies his theory by reference to various philosophers, using philosophical language that can be daunting. Nevertheless, the essence of the treatise is not unfathomable and should not be ignored because some passages are opaque. Fry's aim was "to create an ability to recognize what the defutured is, and to demonstrate that this understanding is transferable into an employable sensibility in professional practice and daily life" (143). He has done that. The recognition and demonstration of sustain-ability is now our collective responsibility.

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1   See https://www.rebootinnovation.com/why (accessed October 24, 2020).

2   The hyphen is crucial, emphasizing "able to be sustained."

3   See https://shop.fairphone.com/en/?ref=header (accessed October 26, 2020).

4   See https://www.winnowsolutions.com/vision (accessed October 26, 2020).

5   "Chris Sherwin—Move over Human-Centredness, It's Time for Humanity-Centred Design," presentation to Mobile UX London, May 1, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J04bqNw5FAk (accessed October 26, 2020).

6   Attributed to Futerra, a sustainability consultancy whose mission is to "turn the sustainability imperative into the greatest entrepreneurial opportunity for a generation," https://www.wearefuterra.com/about/ (accessed October 26, 2020).

7   "Chris Sherwin—Move over Human-Centredness."

8   See Elizabeth Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality* (Oxford: Berg, 2003).