

2016 Conference Transcription

Date	Friday 1 April, 2016
Session Title	Community
Session Time	14:00 - 16:00
Moderator	Dan Vernon
Speakers	Sarah Kember
Notes	n/a

Intro	<p>Hello and welcome to FutureEverything 2016 Festival Podcast Series. Over two days, in Manchester's iconic Town Hall, we task designers, artists, scientists, and many more, to rethink our resources from life, earth and intelligence, to community and uncertainty, our speakers ask what we might need less, and more of, in in our new future.</p> <p>What might our future communities look like as automation becomes commonplace? Speaking in this session of Community, we heard from Sarah Kember, a writer and academic who has written experimental texts on 'Life on Mars, a Feminist Futurist Manifesto', and set up Goldsmith's first University Press. Her most recent work on 'Women, Futures and Smart Cities', has seen her speak at Transmediale asking. With all these futuristic visions of smart technology, why do women always end up in the kitchen?</p>
Sarah Kember	<p>I wanted to think about the value of stories and the kinds of stories that we tell and can potentially retell about our past, our presents, and our futures, at a particular time when global, national and individual resources are being challenged across scales. From climate change, to the mass movement of people, and to the ever increasing demands on our minds, our bodies, and our time.</p> <p>So if this idea of retelling stories isn't, in a sense, a kind of radical progressive alternative to something inevitably quite conservative, which is restoring resources. Then I'm interested in the potential, the political value, of putting those things into tension which each other.</p> <p>So one of the things I'm going to do is to put into tension a range of oppositions, or apparent oppositions, in the way that we think about resources and in the way that we think; and the old ones are always the best ones. One of the old ones is an apparent division between the real and the ideal, between the world that exists inside our heads and in our minds, and the world that exists outside of that, if it does. You can also think about the division, an ['allogist'? 03:00]</p>

division, if you like, between the fact and fiction. I don't think it's much coincidence in my own writing; and in fact, for a philosopher of writing like Hélène Cixous, writing itself is the thing that occupies the spaces between opposition. So that's where I'm going, to the spaces between oppositions, courtesy of writing, of storytelling.

Part of my issue is that we're living in a time that doesn't seem to value storytelling, writing. It says it doesn't. We're living in a time when economic value is the primary, when economic value trumps all others. Neo-liberalism is a political rationality. It's a social, communal way of being together and it urges us to be real. It urges us to live in facts. I think there is an increasing moral obligation to face up to reality, to deal with the world as it is, and not as we imagine it to be.

I've written a book, just recently, which talks about a moral injunction on us individually, on us collectively, to man up. I think we're being asked to man up. I was inspired, not particularly in a good way, by Sergey Brin, very manly TED Talk about the now defunct Google Glass project. What he says is that mobile phones are emasculating, because you look down and you don't look up. But the glasses would free your hands and lift the head, have us facing the world as we should, with no prop. Now Google Glass may not be completely done. We're not yet 'glassholes', as one witty person put it, but for sure, the tech industry think the future is smart, and that the new smart material is glass. Glass embodies this push towards openness, transparency and immediacy. These are really core neo-liberal values. I think glass ought to embody something that I've been talking about as a tendency towards unmediation, a process of unmediation, which means erasing language, erasing writing, erasing storytelling in all media, from an already smart world that just is, or will very soon come about. Basically, I'm suggesting there's a lot of double speak here.

So in The New Digital Age, Schmidt and Cohen are presenting us in a sense of a de facto future; a future that is inevitable, that is smart. At the same time, mediation comes into it big time, storytelling comes into it big time. They literally tell short stories, and tech developers always do tell short stories. A day in the life of somebody who lives in a future in which the environment itself has become smart and intelligent, and in which our then newly muted and done down subject only has to click her fingers, clap her hands, beat her chest, flutter her eyelids in order to operate a range of ambient intelligent systems. This subject to my way of thinking is increasingly female, it's a 'her'. She's usually called Janet or Jennifer in promotional videos.

I just don't know why, but I am using it in a parody. It's called 'A Day in the Life of Janet Smart', it's the next novel in progress. It's been in progress for some time, to be honest, but it uses Corning's story, 'A Day Made of Glass', it's a promotional video, as a springboard. Corning have always put gender and glass together in ways that I might wish they hadn't. Think about Pyrex and domestic hygiene. Now it;s future kitchens, smart kitchens, smart hospitals, and smart shopping involving three dimensional rotating smart glass shopping assistants. They move when you twiddle them. There's also virtual brain surgery involving... virtual brains, I suppose. Part of my complaint, look who's doing the

shopping and look who's doing the operating! I'm sorry, it's a little bit tedious, but I'll stay with the double speak. I gather that you have been concerned with these issues, time intelligence and life during the conference, and how we think of them, and how we might rethink them. I think we think of them mainly in terms of structure, and succession and sustainability, respectively. What I want to point out is that these terms depend on others that are not evoked. So what isn't structured time and what might that do. Time in neo-liberal times is certainly structured, ordered, organised, efficient, oriented towards productivity, oriented towards labour and the illusion of life in labour. Time as structure produces much disciplined subjects, ordered, organised, efficient, entrepreneurial, pushing for self-perfection as a kind of incredible hyper productivity.

In this book on iMedia, the argument really is that this subject is one of the few things that actually is, or is becoming, ubiquitous in all of this talk that we have about ubiquitous computing as a future that long ago arrived, in a sense. I'm also suggesting that that subject is gendered, is a feminised subject, a Cinderella type subject, labouring hard as a scullery maid. Domestic, hidden and unappreciated, but with the promise of being transformed into a princess. The agent of the transformation always was the glass slipper. So tech visions of smart futures tend to feature these Janet's and Jennifer's as Cinderella subjects, and they're confronted with huge amounts of to do lists and schedules embedded in augmented reality bathroom mirrors and bedroom mirrors and that kind of thing.

These subjects are ubiquitous, they are everywhere for me, in at least those three senses of the word, meaning hyper visible, meaning very much subject of scrutiny. Also, bound up with technology, particularly with smart glass technology, and everywhere in wearables. The role of wearables is regulatory. It's oriented towards reproducing women subjects as productive subjects, but also reproducing women as sexualised objects again. So the conjuncture is, in a sense, fitness trackers, health check apps, and smart bras. Smart bras put into smart bras according to Microsoft, are for measuring mood and preventing stress related overeating, so keeping us nicely productive, I suppose. Unfortunately, a spinoff of the smart bra is this, which as its name suggests, pretty much stays locked most of the time until our heart rate reaches a level to those scientifically associated with true love, in which case, *bah-ding* and the prince has arrived, the Cinderella story is complete.

Moving on. Structure time, time as labour depends on [inaudible 10:39] something else, call it lifetime. I don't mean work, life, balance. I think the moment has gone for that. I mean an evolutionary concept of time as life, as creative evolution, as a process that cannot be structured, that cannot be organised, and that cannot in any way be captured. Where is that? What kind of work can that do?

So I've thought a bit about the politics of time, and also done some work on artificial intelligence, artificial life, which was a while ago, and more recently ambient intelligence. Here, interestingly, the facts and fictions are very much mixed up with each other. We know that. So Schmidt and Cohen are arguing that Google is already engineering beyond minority report, but something is

going on with science fiction. I think it always has been, but is increasingly being co-opted as a prediction, as a kind of blueprint for innovation. Where I think that artists, academics, writers, people like me, do and should collaborate with industry, if not cooperate, I've always read science fiction differently. I've always read and written it not as a prediction, not as a blueprint for innovation, much more as a dissention, much more as an overturning from within of a really relentless push towards technical engineering instrumentalism. So the point of overturning this would not be the overturning. It would be to arrive at an imaginary that is more fully social, less technical, less ['technacist'? 12:14] and messier, I think, as a result.

In any case, if we are becoming more mechanic, more robotic, as time disciplined subjects, the answer isn't go to some pure notion of the human versus the machine, it's a paranoid structure. That it produces lots of interesting culture, but it relies on a notion of intelligence, intelligent beings or artificial intelligence that will either serve us or succeed us. So it's done well in terms of culture, but I think the time is up.

Last but not least, this idea of life which is obviously contestable does a lot of tidying up work, I think. It tidy's up a mess of biosocial relations, of human machine relations. The sublimated other of life is of course death, but when we think about death in a climate change context, we think of the extinction of the human versus the machine. It's human life as we know it that, I think, we're seeking to sustain, where life as the product of a co-evolutionary process of biological and technological systems is the threat to that. I think it is in the debate on big history, for example. Big history puts human history in evolutionary time, from the beginning to the end, from the big bang to the big crunch. It's a humanist story. It's a salvationist story. So back on the TED stage, David Christian, he wrote the book 'Maps of Time'. David Christian, who is a big historian, suggests that it's not too late to save ourselves. There is still sustainable technology, there is still population control etc. At the end of his talk, he brings his grandson onto the stage, as if to say, one day my son, all this, it will still be yours. So he puts Daniel's first year very much with an evolutionary timeline, just thinking it might be good to just have a bit less masculinism, a bit less humanism, more human exceptionalism in climate change debates, and think about the fair sharing of resources between humans in different parts of the world, and between humans and other animals. In any case, my point is that the sustainability discourse of life is a little bit too oriented towards this time discipline subject I've mentioned.

I'm just going to quickly whip through these oppositions, and just to point out, the aim is not to flip from one to the other. The aim is to try and get beyond these kinds of divisions in the way that we think about resources. Beyond could be anything. Beyond could be a concept. It could be a story. It could be a new form of communication. I'm currently working on a new press, a new publishers, it's Goldsmith's Press. The point for me in setting up a new press is to re-story publishing, not to restore it. Not to restore publishing the humanities scholarship as we know it, when some of those things have been subject to commercialisation, standardisation processes.

So the re-storying and the re-storing for me are in tension with each other, and that's what I'm trying to get at. Things that aren't necessarily split, but exist in tension. So future paths, we tend to split. We tend to hive off the past, and then we can hide it. I think that's probably what we get in tech visions of the future that aren't very imaginative. The imaginaries are not that imaginative. The future city looks much the same as it always did. The future home looks much the same as it always did. So we have Microsoft's future home and we have Monsanto's back from the 1950s, they're not that different. The city is very generic, similarly. Adam Greenfield made this case against the smart city on the basis that we've lived in it before. It's the ridged functional administrative architecture and urban planning of the modernist period. So we need to look at previous critiques of earlier futurisms. Like the Jack [inaudible 16:30] and Playtime on the future visions of the fifties. One of the things that is getting brought forward from the fifties is this re-domestication of women, a re-traditionalisation of gender roles, which puts Microsoft's Janet right back in the kitchen with Monsanto's from the fifties. Sometimes, I think, all we've really done is swapped smart glass for melamine, not a [inaudible 16:58].

So we can't just keep detecting the fifties by stealth, we have to actually look at what it's doing here. The opposition, smart dumb, is extremely tempting for me. Not least because of technological failures, the comedic properties of a cheap building, paranoid androids, and mishearing communication devices, and chastity bras, to be perfectly honest with you. What comes out of this for me may have something to do with the critical value, the political value of humour. Obviously, people have thought about that before, they've examined that before, and I'm interested in it because of the tension that exists in laughter. We know that laughter is an expression of tension, but it doesn't really have much duration. It doesn't really constitute a politic necessarily, when a kind of rebellious laugh that we might have at the chastity bra isn't really distinguishable from a sexist one, even from an ironically sexist one. I think sometimes it's just difficult to know what else to do.

I'm just going to go through these other three fairly quickly. I've mentioned this push towards transparency, openness, immediacy as being a core thing within neo-liberalism. It tends to displace politics, because if everything is already open, if everything is already clear, if everything is already transparent, there isn't a lot more work to do. What are we exactly struggling with if everything is already there in front of us? Of course, this displacement of politics is a slight of a hand and we do have to think about the opacities within transparency, what is closed in all of this talk of openness. Some of these enclosures or opacities have to do with commercialisation, and some of them just purely to do with power as it operates at an infrastructural level through algorithms, through analytics, predictive analytics and all the rest of it. Then obviously, there are the macro structures of power, which have to do with access to governments, access to international policy making. Just because Google is open, doesn't remove the issues around power. In fact, that book, 'The New Digital Age', is pretty much a peon to power. It's pretty unabashed.

The issue of the sterile environment has come up because smart future, smart environment towns and cities look very sterile. They're corporate, they're

	<p>computational. They're not a lot else. However, if you create this idea of a political vacuum, politics rushes in, and politics rushes in particularly gendered ways, I think, at the moment. So we get new forms of misogyny. We get new forms of sexism. It's not just smart sexism and chastity bras, it's things like Gamergate that we've been dealing with. It's things like the everyday sexism project that Laura Bates has started up. I think in this kind of context, I'm sure you've heard of this, it is not obvious to ask, as Hélène Cixous once did, what can writing do about it? I think it's necessary, and there's no coincidence that the success of this project is contingent on the hundreds of thousands of women who have added their stories.</p> <p>So writing and storying was never just about words, it was always much more about worlds and world making. My point is partly that the tech industries know this. They've mastered this. At the same time, they are creating subjects that can no longer write, because their environments are haptic, gestural, intuitive, and immediately responsive. They can no longer write because technologies are automating everything, including speech, including writing. So for me, that puts writing and storytelling, and science fiction right back up as important strategic elements. But instead of thinking about science fiction as something that gets to be applied to the real world as if they were separate; instead of thinking about science fiction as something that might grow up and be science fact, I think, if we recognise that they're already in touch with each other, they're already connected, then we get to retain the less celebratory, more critical, more strategic role that storytelling and fiction can have. Not in being applied, not in determining, or helping to determine what futures are, but I think precisely the opposite actually in helping to undetermine them.</p>
Outro	We hope you enjoyed Sarah's talk and thanks for listening. You can hear the rest of the talks from 2016 at futureeverything.org/2016podcasts .

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