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– Mika Hannula language checked final

LIMITS OF UNDERSTANDING –

Talking with and Listening to Charles Harrison

What is it that actually is taking place when you are meeting, seriously and with commitment engaging into a conversation with a person whom you had not previously known, and a person who comes dramatically, in terms of his/her experiences of and with age, class and race from a different perspective and a different life world than you?

Is such a meeting, at all, possible? Can it be meaningful conversation or is it bound for the surface level superficialities? If yes, as in the case that such meetings are possible, what and how is exchanged in the encounter? And how is that give and take site and situation established if and when so many issues and elements stand in-between the process? In other words, this is to ask about the dual and intertwined set of questions: 1) what are the limits of understanding in a narrative interview? and 2) what, nevertheless the limitations, can be achieved, and if so, how and why?

As it has been often enough stated, but which nevertheless needs to be kept in mind, during the three-year Modernity Retired research project we (as a collective of three persons) met a total of 30 architects and designers who were already active at the end of the 1950s. We met these individuals, who were born between 1928 and 1936, in the four cities of Berlin (during the years of interest to us, the 1950s, of course it was East Berlin), Istanbul, Chicago and Tel Aviv. We asked all of them this seemingly simple question, as a start up and start off: how did you experience modernity in the end of '50s? What did it mean to you?

The difficulties, the hindrances, and the potential blocking points for any kind of a comprehensive exchange and mutual understanding are evident. We were reaching across a divide that was made, at least, of the following structurally determined aspects

- 1) Generation difference (the interviewed ones were born before the II WW and the researchers in the 1960's)
- 2) Geographical difference (the researchers were born, grew up and work in the Nordic countries)
- 3) Time (how to connect end of the 1950's and contemporary issues of the new millennium)

What, on the other hand, was working for us, working for the aim of trying to generate and create a conversational exchange of push and pull, was certain central things that we shared and that we were interested in discussion about

- 1) The shared interest in the theme of what is modern, how to relate and reflect what is modernity and how to share lived experiences of modernity.
- 2) The mutually shared conversational ground, not yet anywhere what could be described as a common presuppositional ground, but an accessibility and present sense of having a heterogeneous but focused practice of thinking with the issues at hand – be it from the perspective of an architect, a designer, a researcher or a writer.

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So, these were the tasks, and these were the inherent and openly visible stumbling blocs. What happened, there and then?

As a case, I will highlight one of these interviews, one of these meetings, one of these conversations. The case I will discuss is the conversation we had with Charles Harrison, born 1931, an African-American product designer who worked for over 30 years at the Sears Roebuck & Company, starting as a freelance designer and ending up as the head of the design department. Harrison is best known for doing the re-design for a product that most of us have indeed held in our hands. In 1958 he re-modeled the previously clumsy and big device called View-Master so that it become smaller, accessible, cheaper and, well, gained a complete new audience and popularity with children. He is also known for designing first plastic bin, in 1963. Charles Harrison has been awarded with basically all the relevant prizes in his field, for example, the National Design Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Smithsonian Institution's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum.

Our meeting took place at Charles Harrison's home, at Evanston, north of the city centre of Chicago. We met him that one time, there and then, in 10th of October 2012. As material, I am using the transcript of this meeting, and the video material of it. Along these, I have also the interview conducted with Zoë Ryan, done in February 15, 2011, for the exhibition and a catalogue of Learning Modern project. (Ryan 2012)

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Before getting into the narrative, the stories told and what these stories might have to say and tell to us, emerging and created during the conversation with Charles Harrison, and now, interpreting them, it is beneficial to proceed slowly and without haste, and to take a side step in order to reflect upon the philosophical presuppositions and well, both chances and challenges of such meetings and conversations. This is to ask after the conceptual and philosophical limits of understanding and translation, also transmission of experiences from one time, one person, and one perspective to another. It is a question of the possibilities of learning, knowing and sharing, to list a few of impacts of this huge issue that is now opened and stared at.

When beginning at the presuppositions of what is necessary for the situated and committed, embedded and anchored analysis of any theme, site and event, it is important and productive to recall the basic notions of both the reflections provided by C. Wright Mills and Isaiah Berlin – each respectively articulating the issues from their particular stand points but generating an overlapping framework for the interpretation structure. This is to emphasize the inherent need to get connected to a) biographical and social elements of a given site and case, and b) to the sense and sensibility of the chosen time and place of research.

For Mills, writing at the end of the 1950's, it all goes directly to the very relation and confrontation between the two main elements of any site and situation: combinations, contradictions and antagonisms between a person and a society. It is about each scenes, each parts, and each fields connectedness to one another. To paraphrase: how each element affects the other. Therefore, there are no personal issues that can be meaningfully analyzed without their links to the larger scale social, political and historical issues at play at their particular structurally defined site. Personal troubles are always social troubles and vice versa. "Problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of societies occur." (2000, 226)

While Mills was demanding a seriously embedded and acted upon craftsmanship based on what he called sociological imagination, Isaiah Berlin, in his essay, originally delivered as a lecture in 1953, called "The Sense of Reality", is after the similar situatedness but from a different perspective. What Berlin is after is, well, already articulated in the title of the text. What he means by this that no matter what the theme or context, there are no over-all a priori formulas, no solutions, no guarantees. "There is no substitute for a sense of reality". (1996, 35)

What Berlin indicates by this is the interplay between what he calls the levels of upper and lower ones, and also the insight from inside in and then from a non-participants position. What this refers to is the necessity to link the structures of a society with the everyday experience of the individuals within those structures – without establishing a hierarchy but an interaction and involvement between each level. These are then views and visions of both the structures and the everyday that are not to be taken as authentic but constantly on

the move and on the make. This act of inspired guesswork, of connecting the dots is to get closer to what the everyday life is made of, gaining both distance and nearness to “the kind of semi-instinctive integration of the unaccountable infinitesimals of which individual and social life is composed”. (Ibid. 33)

In this act, a series of acts, to be precise, various types of skills are required and involved, such as powers of observation, knowledge of facts, and most importantly experience. When brought together, we speak about “a sense of timing, sensitiveness to the needs and capacities of human beings, political and historical genius, in short the kind of human wisdom, ability to conduct one’s life or fit means to ends, with which, as Faust found, mere knowledge of facts – learning, science, was not at all identical.” (Ibid 33)

In his text, Berlin is not only referring to the imagined experiences of a figure called Faust, but also referring directly to the epilogue of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* – and text that is something we could nowadays easily call an essay in history of ideas, or even an essay in intellectual history. Both references underline what is going in the processes of trying to get access to that ambiguous and difficult aim of a “sense of reality” – a task that is bound to be slippery and frustrating. Nevertheless, there is no other path, no other way. But this “sense of reality” is not only achieved through rational thinking of hypothetical and deductive method. It requires much more, and something else. It needs a combination of hearts and minds, emotions and motions. Or, to be precise, emotions in motions within inter-relational processes that must be maintained, criticized, produced and protected.

But, altering the perspective again, and returning straight back to the heaviness of the limits of this accessibility of another person’s hearts and minds, his/hers burdens and joys, shames and pleasures, how is this possible? Or is it possible, like you know, at all – or just filled with imitations of life and illusions of intimacy?

Once again, it is rather stupendous, if not horrifying, what the limitations at the forefront actually seem to make and take. If and when we are addressing the actualizations between a space of experience and a horizon of expectations, how can we ever bridge the gap between then and now, between a person and another – between race, religion, gender, in short, any and every context-based experiences?

For to comprehend these limitations, we do not have to refer to any theoretical applications. We know this by each and everyone's daily get-togethers, recollections, lies and stories, well, our lived and told experiences. Something is shared, something is translatable and well, a great deal gets lost and is never found and sometimes that is also very good so. Because not everything we do is in itself worthwhile recalling. But we do come from different contexts, different *Weltanschauung*, different life worlds, and our background familiarities are not identical. This difference is enough, as a starting point, and it must not be colored with any prescriptions such as being messy, random, occasional or not rational or not significant. It can be all of them or none of them – always depending on that very articulation and actualization of a difference within a time and a space.

But: are our conditions of conditions at all comparable? Or combinable? Can we communicate from one to the other? Are we chastened to consensus or doomed to chaos? Are we able, to use the vocabulary of John Rawls (1993), and in what conditions of conditions, to have and even enjoy reasonable disagreements or are we parked at the dead-end of intractable disagreements?

The tools for the trade to define these distinctions and differences calls this the dilemma of something being either incompatible or incommensurable. The former claims, despite deep-seated differences, that there is to be a connection between two positions, while the latter states that each side is mutual unrecognizable to one another. What these loaded concepts mean and imply, is a huge open-ended debate of itself. But what they indicate for any research project is this: how do we deal with a reality that is plural, incoherent and filled with confusion – a sense of reality that escapes the model army of duds chasing blindly for completeness, consistency, comprehensiveness and coherence?

To turn this dilemma other way around, the problem is not, according to Spinoza and Dreyfus, in fact, stable distinctions or too chaotic formulations. The problem is “refusing to recognize other worlds as other worlds.” (1996, 738). Difference takes on that a same or similar reality exist, and they actually do co-exist, in and through conflicts, both open and hidden, no matter if we realize or acknowledge them. What's more, following now Mills (2000, 211), imagination is itself the act of being able and willing to alter perspectives, to shift from one position to another and to compare them. Ethically speaking, in the

encounters between us human beings, it is to imagine and to recognize both oneself in the other and the otherness in oneself.

What Spinoza and Dreyfus suggest is that we accept something that they label a weak incommensurability that recognizes the impossibilities of bridging the gap between A and B's life worlds and their time-based experiences, but nevertheless chooses to claim for and to support a minimal link, a sort of a shouting distance and a visual accessibility, however blurry, or unsatisfying, between A and B. This is then called minimal intelligibility. The issue is in its simplistic beauty this and nothing but this: are we to engage or to elude with this dilemma of plural realities that burn and heal, always and non-stop simultaneously?

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What, how, and when, and why, not to forget, why not?

In terms of relating and reflecting with the conversation with Charles Harrison, the method that I have developed in and through these meetings is a situated and embedded concept called *moving towards*. It is a practice bound and defined concept that recognizes the necessity to allow, but not to glorify, the mis-understandings, the incoherence and the inability to connect the life worlds and experiences across generations, perspectives and preferences, but nevertheless, to be able to create and generate something else.

This something else, in and through that one-off, that one time only meeting and conversation is nothing more, nothing less than stories. Telling stories and listening to them. Exchanging opinions and anecdotes while moving towards one another – all the time perfectly aware that there will never be a completeness of the encounter, just bits and pieces, contacts and connections that hopefully leave a trace and generate an effect that is carried with and along to the next meetings and encounters.

Thus, with the meeting, and this interpretation of and with it, the aim was to move towards the stories and the position that he speaks from. One the face of it, it is a story, not that unusual for its time, about being black, poor but proud, living in South-Side of Chicago in 1957. This is where Charles was living with his wife. This is where they lived because that's where blacks lived. The numbers, and the incorporated history of the numbers is here both important and determining. What we asked, and what the stories told by Charles circles around was the years before and after 1960. But it is only in 1963 that the law changed. Or, to scrape a sense of accuracy, it started to get changed and slowly implemented into the daily practices. Until then, it was a society based on racist laws called segregation between whites and blacks.

Hold on. The numbers. 1957 to 1963 and then to 2014. How many years, how many tears, how many incomplete catches between then and now? Can we understand what it means to be living in a racist society, the intensity of that experience and the consequences of it in and through the everyday, the lived body of a person? No, we cannot. But what we can get closer to are the stories that Charles Harrison is telling about that time, that place.

Harrison recalls the beginning of his career. He finished the university as a honors student. He was the only colored person in his class. All the others found work easily. He did not. After a numbing number of try-outs, entering into job interviews and being directly turned down once they saw his skin color, Harrison got a lucky break. Someone he knew from his university staff wanted to hire him. But this person, working in Sears Roebuck could not. This person was not American by origin, and he had overseen an unsaid policy. Still in the time of 1957, the company did not hire blacks.

However, Harrison was indeed hired, but well, indirectly. He got design assignments and a job, but only as a free lancer. He was not allowed to come to the office. Work was brought and collected from him. Then he got another lucky break. His professor from the university, Henry Glass, an authority figure with gravity in the history of the field and within high modernism of the 50's, started a new company, doing mainly furniture design, and Harrison was hired there as an assistant and as a designer. Here, at the job, he decisively learned by doing things. One by one, item by item.

Again, numbers. In 1957 it was impossible, but 5 years later, the same company wanted him – and had, by there and then, believe it or not, changed its hiring policies. So began a career in the heart of the product design industry of USA that got off as a free-lance designer and ended as a manager of the whole design unit some 30 years later. And in-between, the years of not being able to show ones face and then being the boss of them all – something definitely had altered. Something had changed in the social imagination of that site.

When he started working, in 1962, at the company, Harrison remembers that there was no other African-American designers in business. Almost no other. He remembers that in the whole country, as far as he was aware, there was just another one, working and living in Cincinnati. There was a third person but well, he was not a real product designer. He did stylizing jobs for the automobile industry in Detroit, and professionally taken, that did not count.

Harrison was, so to speak, alone but not lonely. He was not less paid than any others, because as he recalls, everyone worked long hours and was lowly paid. He was also not treated different at the work place due to his skin color because there were other issues at play: ability, skills and teamwork. For lunch, everyone met at the riverside, all the creative class strugglers coming together and exchanging stories about work place, payment and conditions of their conditions.

But when did it change, the race issue? Harrison points out a couple of significant characters from the world of sports, such as Jackie Robinson (1919-1971, first African-American playing in major league baseball, breaking the color code with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947) and Muhammad Ali (a boxer, heavy weight world champion with the mouth that was even faster than his fists), but what, in his view, did really change it all was the murder of Martin Luther King in 1968. This is when the fuse blew out. The result was civil tumult, riots and police aggression. As the way history is written after that, there was no way going back from that. What was held together was now beginning to be dissolved.

The question is: can we understand that paradigmatic change? We can compare it, perhaps, with the sea change in structures and experiences that the fall of the Berlin Wall has caused. But is it the same, or similar enough?

I do not know.

But what I do know is that there is, along the more macro level reflections of Charles Harrison, the biographical and micro level memories and experiences. Whereas the macro level recollections are strongly influenced by the still biting hard sadness and anger due to racism in his country, the micro level recollections take another turn.

Charles Harrison reflects upon why did he choose to turn to arts and especially product design. This was, as for many, there and then and also very much so afterwards, by chance. It is simple as that – a choice that opened up and materialized. When considering what to do and what to study for a profession after the first degree, his approach to this choice was strongly motivated by the very specific conditions where he found himself at the time.

He was serving in the army, working as a cartographer in the southern part of Germany, re-writing the maps after the II WW. During his stay in the military, Harrison found out that his service time would be shortened if he was able to enter into a masters program at a university. The point of the timing was such that the start of the studies needed to coincide with the timing of his military duties. He applied to graduate schools to study architecture, not in US but in Ecuador, Columbia and Brazil. He got accepted to all of them but the timing was not right. With the beginning of the semester and the service time not overlapping, he would not have won any time off from the military.

Then he got another idea and asked his former professors and supervisors at the School of the Art Institute if they had any ideas and if they could help him out. The dean of that time wanted to help but they did not have a graduate program for industrial design, but in the end, that was not an issue, because they found a very particular solution. “So, they created a program, just for me. I was the only student ever to do graduate study in industrial design at SAIC.”

But this seemingly random choice and an inter-linked set of events has a structural dimension and a background, something that he has personally struggled with and only later came to terms with. He is, at his old age, for example, learning a new language. Because the thing is that Charles Harrison is dyslectic. He has great troubles in reading and

writing. A disadvantage, to say the least, that lost a lot of its weight when he discovered the world of the arts; a field and practice where he was not only depending on words and numbers. He was able to communicate visually. He found a site that he felt home at – a field of arts that was, in his words, not as fierce, vicious and intense with competition. And this is the site, the practice and its development with which he made everything that was available the best of – turning a life long career in designing objects that were both beautiful and functional – and which sold. The wares did move well, very well from the shelves. And that, says Harrison, that was important.

When asked what was the first modern object he was able to acquire, the designer, the professional within his practice lights up, the eyes get a different take and a gleam. He remembers it well, very well. And when teased about it, wondering whether it can be true, he laughs, gets up and asks us to follow him to the other room. There was the proof. The chair that he had bought. It was the year they got married, the number is 1957.

Charles Harrison: “The first thing I bought for our house was the Charles Eames chair”

Interviewer: Even before a refrigerator?

CH: Yes, in those days, the refrigerator came with the house.

Int: But you felt the need to have that lounge chair?

CH: Oh yes, I did, I am a designer, you know.

Int: An icon of modernity.

CH: Yes, what I have to tell you, we didn't pay cash, I mean we paid a little each month till we got it, and we still own it.”

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The story of Charles Harrison. After finishing with Sears Roebuck, Harrison has been active in teaching, and trying to define a content for the product design curriculum, aiming for end results that are well made, that are desirable in appearance and in usage – and that sell well. He is strongly in favor of the hands-on approach, combining digital tools with the handmade processes.

“Since Sears, I’ve been immersed in education and have become involved with how design is taught. As to practicing designers today, I feel that they should maintain a high level of aesthetic quality and design, but I think that it’s difficult now, more difficult than before, with the use of the computer in design. A lot of the thinking in design is now done through the computer, the digital process doesn’t flow like the analog process does.” (Ryan 2012, 236)

Charles Harrison made it, and he made it big. He has gotten credit and admiration, even followers. He has been called Jackie Robinson of product design by a major newspaper.

This is something that we ought to have no trouble at understanding and enjoying. And the rest? Do we have mental access to something else, something more?

I do not know.

I read the transcripts, the interview. I see his face and I hear his voice in the video. I do remember the time and location. I do recall how that very temporary site and a connection was made – the warmth of the personal stories told by him. I think, especially, that I am capable of thinking with, to gaze out of the box, to open up – see and feel something that was not there before, something that emerged in and through our exchange, our conversation. But at the same time, I know that something is left unsaid, unasked – unmet.

What remains is a contact, a connection. A temporal interaction that is bound to fade and disappear. But something does remain – as a potentiality. At the best of times, this contact leaves a trace, makes a dent into both of the participants in that thing called a conversation.

A dent and a trace, which are not by themselves anything significant or important. They can be that – depending on what they cause and stir. Not as major laser works of shifting balances between or within social and political structures, but as stories. Told and listened to, shared and cared for. Bouncing off and on, and always, always returning back to the sender in a slightly bit altered form and function.

The funny thing is, when talking about this short and one-off encounter in lectures and presentations, when I try to lift myself and my role up, boasting about it (ironically speaking), stating that I am the only person in the room that has shaken hands with the guy who actually made the object of our childhood recollections, the remodeled version of the View-Master, I get a couple of laughs and a couple of skeptical stares. What I sense is that people do not believe me. They like the story, the reappearance of that object of the childhood past to their current spheres of experience, and they enjoy the memories of their own that the object in itself re-activates.

But to connect this object with the story of the guy who is behind it, his troubles and his tales of empowerment, that's seems to be a bit too far away. How can you face the idea that some real person, an individual of flesh and blood, sweat and tears, with a story to tell about the dramatic changes in our social imagination through the last 60 years, has really made that thing that is part of your childhood? And that someone, now confronted in a completely different set-up, has recently met with him and that all this, all these inter-connections and connotations should be somehow relevant and important?

Close to impossible, at least, not probable, clearly. We face the framework of the limitations of our condition of conditions of being stuck in the daily groove that we are embedded at. To say this with another vocabulary: reaching out and touching across the gap between each individual, context and time bound lived experience is not easy, but yes, it is possible.

I can understand and feel with the difficulties, and the hindrances. Making the mind ready for the act of connecting the dots between past, present and future, and the individual and the society, their internal conflicts and contests, is a challenge. But if we want to, if we are able to open up – and if we find the energy and courage to listen to and allow what is told

to us to stir and throw us off the balance, then it can happen, it can take place and make space.

It is easy for me to speak and to be convinced. I was there and then. I have that lived experience. I did it. I did talk to him, I did shake his hand, even couple of times. And I listened. Oh yes, I did.

Literature

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