

## 1. Crossed Perspectives



# On the Move: in the Virtual and the Physical Worlds

Between Sven Kesselring (Sociologue)  
And Elly Clarke (Artiste)

01 March 2013

A photographer and a sociologist discuss the relationship between real and virtual mobilities, and their increasing impact on our way of life in terms of climate change and the energy crisis.

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## 01. What's the relationship between physical and virtual mobility? Is one a substitute for another? Are they complementary? Are they interdependent? Or are they in opposition?



Sven Kesselring

There is no easy answer on this and I prefer the notion of digital instead of virtual mobility. The nature of these new forms of mobility, and also of connectivity and immediacy, is that codes, signs, digits, symbols and pictures are travelling through time and space. More and more, technological spaces envelop human activities, movements and interactions. Physical worlds and virtual ones – better digitally manufactured worlds – are connected, interrelated and influence each other.

But more than this: technological/digital spaces are always already there when we travel. And while we are on the move – in trains, buses, cars, bikes, on ships or in the air – these digital spaces are travelling with us. Mobility, in the sense of being able to change our position in space, gets transformed because now we have still more opportunities to be connected, to get information, to visit places and people – in virtual space. New technology-based opportunity spaces transform and modify contemporary and future mobility cultures.



E. C

I really like the image of the codes, signs, digits, symbols and pictures travelling with us as we physically move through the world – like a speech bubble above a head in a cartoon. I think what's interesting is how the presence of these codes affects how we understand not only where we are but also who we are, and who the other people around us are. As you say, the further developed these digital spaces become, the more interrelated and ultimately interdependent digital and physical mobility will be.



Elly Clarke

Without doubt, physical and virtual mobility are becoming increasingly complementary. On a simple level, GPS helps us find our way to the next party. And that brilliant When is My Next Bus Coming app means I don't have to try to read a timetable any more. But more poetically, experiencing a place in reality is often merely a follow-up to the virtual journey already begun online. The physical experience of a place is measured often only in so far as it can be described to those who are not there, via photos, videos, tweets, Instagrams or Facebook.

As an artist and curator I'm interested in the impact of this ever-increasing mobility upon our sense of self, both when alone and as part of a community. I am interested in the way we negotiate these double lives, between 'real' and 'virtual', 'here' and 'there'. *My girlfriend is in the bathroom; a long-ago lover on a different continent, in a different time-zone, tweets a picture of her lunch.* And in how this impacts upon the way we move through space and interact with the people we live alongside.



S. K

I agree, we are facing the rise of new mobility and new technological cultures. Virtual life used to be the bailiwick of science fiction authors but today, otherness, simultaneity and synchronicities are part of our routines.

However, we completely ignore the social inequalities of access to these technologies and forget how elitist this point of view actually is. What mobility pioneers call new opportunities also implies a powerful culture of control and a loss of freedom. The right to be not available, to be disconnected, becomes something precious - and maybe even a luxury in a hyper-mobile world.

## **02. As these two kinds of mobility continue to develop, what impact are they having on working lives, and also on the way we live today?**



Sven Kesselring

A deep and transformative impact. Mobile work may be the issue of the next decade and beyond. We can work wherever and whenever we want, given the technological equipment. Being accessible and connected while on the move is maybe the most important change in business life. Business travel is no longer an individual and solitary activity. More and more you have travelling companions who are talking into your ear, sending you messages or briefings. You can't log off any more, and many people lose control over their mobility.

We need to regain the ability and the right not to answer immediately when emails pop up, to practise what the 19<sup>th</sup> century called the panoramatic gaze: to lift your head and to see what's around you. We also lose a lot of concentration, and a sense of landscape and geography, through new technologies. But of course we also benefit from them. We realise one of the dreams of mankind: to travel with our friends even when they are travelling in the opposite direction or staying behind.



E. C

I totally agree that we need to regain the right not to be contactable at all times. Stress caused by the pressure of such 24/7 contact is on the increase. I read that some hotels in New York now have a “hand in your mobile phone” policy so that guests can get some time off. About the only time you really have a break is on a flight: headspace and solitude only when jammed into a small seat travelling at 700 mph. But this connectivity is also incredible. Without it I couldn't do the work I do.



Elly Clarke

While linking up via technology should reduce the need for travel, it often does the opposite. Mobile technology changes our concept of 'near' and 'far'. We know more about what is going on somewhere else than ever before. After a while, the desire to experience this for real translates into a flight or train booking. For virtual mobility is not yet a substitute for physical mobility.

As someone whose life is divided between Birmingham, Berlin and London, this constant awareness of events going on in different cities also brings a sense of restlessness – a feeling that I'm never properly anywhere.

As for working lives, the more people work from home, the greater the danger of feeling isolated. Connected Isolation is the title of an online exhibition I am curating in November – December 2012, on NYC-based site **CultureHall.com**. I'm worried that physical mobility will be reserved for the 'important' people, while the workers will feel cut off. Loneliness is a side effect of virtual connectivity. Even with Skype eye contact is not possible.



S. K

Digital mobilities and the interminglings of virtual, technological, social and physical spaces have transformed our perceptions of what is normal. More and more people are confronted with expectations to be mobile, flexible and present. Today it is estimated that about 35% of all jobs are so-called mobile work. This means that workers are permanently transferring data while on the move. This revolution is having a lasting and irreversible impact on all forms of communication and social interaction.

### **03. Are such developments sustainable, given the challenges we face in terms of climate change and energy crisis?**



Sven Kesselring

No, absolutely not, at least not yet. Current mobility systems are far from being sustainable. The world has reached the level of 35 trillion passenger-kilometres per year and it is supposed to double within the next 40 years. This has tremendous negative side effects on quality of life, health, social life and the environment. It's a disastrous outlook. Virtual mobility heats up physical mobility. The more we communicate the more reasons we have to travel.

The usual suspects in politics and industry haven't been able to change these path dependencies. But we need to find new ways, new experts and ordinary people and new policies to manage the transition into sustainable mobility. We all need to rethink mobility: how we can be connected with people we love and we work with and with places, cultures and expertise around the globe. There is no way back into a life without mobility, and technologies might play an important role in this. But the future of mobility needs innovative thinking and planning.



E. C

I love this phrase "virtual mobility heats up physical mobility". Something has to be done to curb the increase in physical travel. I think that investment in local communities is essential. The more people can do from where they are, the less need they'll have to travel. On a more extreme level, I can foresee a time when travel will have to be rationed. And this is where it could get scary as it will be the "important" people who travel a lot, while those considered less so will be restricted.



Elly Clarke

Trying to persuade people to travel less is difficult, so the key is in building up local communities and making people aware of what's happening near by. It's just as easy (if not easier) to hear what's happening at the Museum of Modern Art in New York as it is to find out about the gallery down the road. So local venues need to figure out how to draw close-by people in, to bring them together in real time, same space, away from computers.

On a personal level, I do feel guilty about the amount I fly, but art, as yet, cannot be appreciated entirely online. In the art world especially, interpersonal relationships are the fulcrum of collaboration, so meeting face to face is imperative. My latest curatorial project FRAME\_birmingham has been devised in response to some of these issues. It installs small 2d works by artists from over the world in venues and businesses across the city as a way of bringing art to new audiences. Art in this sense can bring local communities together and build stronger links within cities.



S. K

When we talk about sustainability we often forget the social dimension. People need to learn to say 'no' when faced with more mobility demands. An extreme example is Ryan Bingham, the frequent flyer George Clooney portrayed in the movie Up in the Air, who shows that we must learn to sustain social relations in a world of permanent motion.

The mobilisation of our lives is perhaps our biggest challenge as a society. I believe that changing our work culture may be the best way to meet that challenge and to enable a sustainable development of mobility.

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**Associated Thematics :**

### Lifestyles

- Diversity of lifestyles
- Futures
- Digital technologies
- Proximity

- Work

## Policies

- Ecological transition
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Sven Kesselring

Sociologue

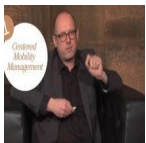
Dr. Sven Kesselring is a sociologist and a leading authority on mobility. He is professor in mobility, governance and planning at Aalborg University, Denmark, and the head of mobilities research at the Munich-based Innovationsmanufaktur GmbH. In 2004 he was the founder of the Cosmobilities Network.

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Video by Sven Kesselring



Elly Clarke

Artiste

Elly Clarke is a photographer, artist and curator with a particular interest in mobility – of people, information and things. Based in Birmingham and Berlin, her work has been exhibited in the UK, Germany and Russia.

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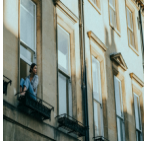
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