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Unnatural Capital

Bataille beyond Design

Jamer Hunt

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Hair-shirt environmentalism preaches that we must get by with radically less if we hope to avoid a looming environmental calamity. This argument has, on its surface, a perfectly sensible logic to it: too many people plus too much consumption plus too much waste divided by one planet equals catastrophe. Lessen the numerator in that equation and we diminish the inevitability of global destruction, or so it would seem. The only hitch, at least up until now, is that lessening human desire and consumption does not seem to have worked as a guiding principle. Rapacious consumption continues apace.

Can we think and act otherwise? Can we design a way forward that does not ask us to produce and consume less, but instead embraces our immense appetite for both creation and destruction? And what would that look like? In his book *Bataille's Peak*, Allan Stoekl interweaves the philosophy of Georges Bataille – a French surrealist pornographer philosopher – with an analysis of our current ecological condition.

Like an inspired surrealist, Allan Stoekl rubs together two unlikely objects, and the spark that they create may illuminate a way forward out of this dark place. I want to pick up on Stoekl's eccentric pairing to raise

a slightly different question about the implication of excess for environmentalism: is there something specific to the practice of design – distinct from philosophical discourse – that enables it to push us closer to Bataille’s vision of an economy of excess that might in fact be more sustainable? And how might we appropriate Bataille’s own tortured struggles with language and use value to imagine a different outcome for design practice?

“The object of my research cannot be distinguished from the subject at its boiling point.”

Georges Bataille

That anyone would even considering putting the work of Bataille and that of the leading lights of the ecological movement in the same frame is almost unthinkable. Yet, on the surface, the theory that Georges Bataille’s outlines in *The Accursed Share vol. 1* does have some surprising parallels with that of *Natural Capitalism*, a canonical work of sustainable thinking. Both argue that theories of capitalism have a blindspot: they are incapable of accounting for the circulation of energy as it flows across the landscape of human and natural usage. The result of that myopia is a fundamental misrecognition – at the level of ecosystem – of the centrality of these flows as the “effervescence of life,” to use Bataille’s expression.

Bataille contends that, “Economic science merely generalizes the isolated situation; it restricts its object to operations carried out with a view to a limited end, that of the economic man. It does not take into consideration a play of energy that no particular end limits (23).” Or, as Hawken, Lovins and Lovins write, “Capitalism... liquidates its capital and calls it income. It neglects to assign any value to the largest stocks of capital it employs – the natural resources and living systems (5).” In each case, the authors suggest that the human understanding of the system of capital functions ignorant of larger flows of energy and matter whose very existence is threatened by that lack of awareness. Both portend great human and natural tragedy as a result of this fundamental accounting oversight.

The authors also each argue for a shift away from a system built upon productivity and the commodity-form and toward one of energy flows and the immaterial services that accompany them. For Bataille, the great crime is that, “Servile use has made a thing (an object), of that which, in a deep sense, is of the same nature as the subject, is in a relation of intimate participation with the subject (55).” And the authors of *Natural Capitalism* make an analogous argument, suggesting “a shift from an economy of goods and purchases to one of services and flow (10).” And yet, upon closer reading, the analogy fractures. For *Natural Capitalism*, in the end,

demands the recuperation of “natural capital” into the system of capital itself, placing its bets on capitalism’s ability to sustain our life (provided that we update our bookkeeping methods).

Bataille’s mission is much more irruptive. His work argues for nothing less than an embrace of the useless and the excessive at the expense of the productive and the utilitarian. In this way, his critique echoes that of two others stars in the firmament of sustainable thinking, William McDonough and Michael Braungart. In *Cradle to Cradle*, the authors invoke the example of the cherry tree to counter *Natural Capitalism’s* drift toward hyperefficiency and maximal use value:

The tree makes copious blossoms and fruit without depleting its environment. Once they fall to the ground their materials decompose and break down into nutrients that nourish microorganisms, plants, insects, animals and soil. Though the plant makes more of its ‘product’ than it needs for its own success in an ecosystem, this abundance has evolved...(73).”

This is McDonough and Braungart’s argument that “Waste = Food,” that is, that we must consider waste as an integral part of any natural system and that “effectiveness” is more critical to the success of an ecosystem than “efficiency.” Like Bataille, the authors privilege useless abundance and profligacy over means-to-an-end instrumentalism. And in this way, their argument is closer to Bataille’s in that they recognize that there is a human need for things that surpass utility or efficiency, such as beauty, creativity, fantasy, and enjoyment. They write,

Imagine a fully efficient world...Mozart would hit the piano with a two-by-four. Van Gogh would use one color...And what about efficient sex? An efficient world is not one we envision as delightful. In contrast to nature, it is downright parsimonious (65).

Hair-shirt environmentalism here gives way to humid fever-dreams? Have McDonough and Braungart seemingly stumble into the lusty realm of Bataille’s hothouse imagination?

Not really. For Bataille, who struggles much more onerously and insightfully with this question of excess and its relationship to the system that excludes it, simple beauty is not enough. In other words, it is not enough to make the argument alone in favor of excess and expenditure; it is a matter of understanding that rational thought itself must be at stake if we are to surpass the political economy of the calculative and instrumental. And this is the paradox at the heart of Bataille’s project that infects and corrupts itself in the process of its own writing:

Writing this book in which I was saying that energy finally can only be wasted, I myself was using my energy, my time, working: my research answered in a fundamental way the desire to add to the amount of wealth acquired for mankind (11).

Or later, regarding gift exchange, he reveals the painful, fundamental ambiguity,

The latter thus enters into an ambiguity where it remains: It places the value, the prestige and the truth of life in the negation of the servile use of possessions, but at the same time it makes a servile use of this negation (73).

This recuperative double bind that Bataille describes plunges his project – as he puts it – into the realm of comedy.

What is at stake in Bataille's argument? In effect, he argues that reason – like capital – will always make something useful out of reason's own antithesis; it is impossible, therefore, to represent – through language and thought – a sustainable economy of excess and expenditure. One can point to its shadow, as he tries to, but ultimately the logic of the system will incorporate its other and denature it. It is for this reason, I would argue, that Bataille sought to “represent” his thinking in ways that surpassed any form of argumentation and that pushed into other vehicles of communication. Bataille serially experimented with form and with genres of presentation in search of ways to communicate this *beyond* without it succumbing to its own recuperation. Bataille wrote short stories, novellas, novels, edited experimental journals (*Documents*), formed secret societies (Acéphale), all in an attempt to force the conventions of language and thought to surpass themselves...to enact what he could not say. That is why the object of his research “could not be distinguished from the subject at its boiling point (10).” Subjectivity must overcome itself if the economy of excess is to be emancipatory. Bataille's project was not only to describe a material economy based on the expenditure of forces of energy in a homeostatic system but also to signal the impossibility of its representation in thought.

The implication, for sustainable design thinking, is significant. Could it be that the sustainable futures that we imagine are impossible in that they are the beyond of our own limits? Do we need other forms of representation even to begin the process of dismantling our own spiral downward into planetary hopelessness? Because if, as Bataille seems to suggest, every sincere attempt to productively overcome the current system will only perpetuate the logic of that system, then we must do as Bataille has done, and seek out alternative forms of disruption. “The sexual act is in time what the tiger is in space (12).” Excess can only devour, it cannot

produce. What, then, will be the necessary forms of speculation and change that can enact the sustainable future that we envision?

Design brushes up against our senses. It is an obstacle to our movement. It projects alternate futures. It titillates and tantalizes. We use it to kill, maim, and slowly suffocate. It squanders energy and yet generates energy anew. Its objects are erotic, technical, logical, and sublime. Design is sledgehammers, sex toys, spreadsheets, and stomach staples. It has profoundly changed how we live on this Earth.

Can design, which exists in a nether zone outside the logocentrism of language and argument, mediate the critical with the speculative and posit an alternative pathway to something beyond the unsustainable? Can speculation, envisioning, intervention, and other propositional logics – as expressive (and excessive?) visual and cognitive tools – indicate the irrecuperable differently?

And if so, what might these forms of surpassing our unsustainability even look like? The value – to design – of the dilemma that Bataille opens up is that it forces us to consider how design, unlike language, operates. Do its forms reveal possibilities that Bataille could only point at in his writing? Do they move us to a beyond through the faculties of experience, emotion, physicality, and other less logocentric constructions? Is design a different kind of machine for thinking?

Notes

1. Bataille, Georges *The Accursed Share volume 1* Zone Books, NY. 1991.
2. Hawken, Paul and Amory Lovins and Hunter Lovins *Natural Capitalism* Little, Brown, and Co., NY. 1999.
3. McDonough, William and Michael Braungart *Cradle to Cradle* North Point Press, NY. 2002.