Returning: Sacred Design III

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Indivisibly, industrialised western people exist, at best, in inoperative communities – marked by the loss of myth and the sacred (as community). Inoperative co-existence is what they/we share: it is the normative condition of our instrumentalised/functional individual and collective existence. This encompasses a loss of the communal, commonality and the common good, along with the coming to dominance of the pursuit of individual interests. Social fragmentation has been technologically amplified (contrary to the claim of the rise of electronic/virtual communities and network society).

No matter if it knows it on not, the global population exists in a deepening of 'the crises' of the unsustainable.[1] On the one hand, there are the coming environmental, agricultural, demographic and economic impacts of climate change plus the globalisation of unsustainable production and consumption of a growing global population. On the other hand, there is the inability to constitute collective practical responses to these problems and the failure of national and international politics/political ideologies to transcend interests imbedded in the status quo (including the dominant anthropocentric and ethnocentric modes of subjectivity and paradigm of territorially based sovereignty).

In short, a massive disjuncture exists between the exponential growth of the problems and the ability to respond to them.

A decade and a half ago, motivated by my understanding of the issues just outlined, I argued for the need to create a 'new aesthetics of sacred design by which the desiring power of fetishised commodities offers and delivers a 'cared-for becoming'.[2] What was being acknowledged was a widespread feeling shared by many people that they were living at a time when the survival of a great deal of what they valued and depended upon was at risk by what I was later to name, 'defuturing' – human action that negates a viable future.

The realisation of products made 'sacred by design' was presented as a means to bond making with 'a common sociality of mutual interests.' What these secular but sacred designed products aimed to do was help constitute and animate a symbolic domain in which 'things' were situated as expressive figures of worldly care which acted, as such, to serve the formation of a 'community of care' that invested 'care' as a practice of sustainment (at an individual, communal and biophysical level).

As is often concluded when reviewing one's own work, what I wrote on 'sacred design' is not what I would write now. The basic idea originally presented is not being disavowed, but how it was exposited now seems to lack sufficient contextualisation and persuasive grit. Of course, this view has been coloured by changes in worldly events, encounters with subsequent publications exploring the sacred and what would hopefully be regarded as the development of my own thinking.

But rather than the concept of 'sacred design' losing significance over time, current global circumstances suggest that it is of even greater importance, hence the motivation to revisit, resituate and elaborate it.

Understanding the Sacred

What follows now is a revision of some of the original influences upon Sacred Design I and II. This writing was underscored by the pantheist notion of the sacred that Martin Heidegger embraced via the poetry of Hölderlin. The mood created by his poetry was viewed as bringing the reader into an attunement with that which is fundamentally present (*physis*) and ineffable. This understanding of the sacred rested on seeing the 'holy being of nature' as it enfolded chaos and the abyss, conflict and peace, light and darkness, calm and unease, creation and destruction. Such a characterisation flowed back into a pre-Socratic notion of *physis* – the 'everything that is', especially as intimated by Heraclitus.[3] In such a context 'sacred design' sustains all that is 'holy' (*heilig* – from the originally meaning 'whole'), this before the meaning of the term was captured and colonised by institutional religion.

A secular and more overtly political understanding of 'the sacred' was enunciated by Georges Bataille and his collaborators, then reinforced many years later by Jean-Luc Nancy. Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois and others formed the short lived non-institution, the College of Sociology in 1937. The central conceptual plank of the College was the idea of a 'Sacred Sociology'. Drawing on religious studies and other areas of enquiry, the College sought to study everything that communifies social being. This 'everything' is the gathering of all that constituted the dependent unity that is humanity realised. This is to say that 'community' is the very basis of the sacred. Such an understanding rested on Goethe's self-addressed question/answer: 'what is sacred' – answered: 'that which unites souls.' After a good deal of investigative work, Bataille, Caillois and the College took this statement and substituted 'communification' for the reference to 'that which' unites.[4] At the same time, the relation between the sacred and society was explored by looking at the relationship between 'organism' and 'being'. What these two terms have in common with the idea of 'nature as sacred' is their convergence on the economy of essential exchange in which the biological and social 'organism' meets.

As Bataille was at pains to argue: for there to be creation there has to be destruction, discharge, waste, expenditure, attraction, repulsion, energy – nature simply gives a name to this economy within which 'life' is merely one element. Thus it is not life itself which is sacred but what brings 'life' out of and into 'being' – which (i) is the biological 'organism' (life itself: *zoē*) and (ii) socially, is the communal/community (living as being in common: *bios*). The ritualisation of life (organic and social) coming out of death was seen to link ancient and modern ways of enacting 'the sacred' and transcendental being. In this respect, there is a continuity between say, cannibals in the past eating their dead as an act of homage to 'cheat' the fate of decomposition and an act of symbolic transference making the consumed sacred;[5] and Christians participating in the sacrament of holy communion in order to symbolically 'consume' the body of Christ in order to enable spiritual transfer and sacred unification.

As was recognised in Sacred Design I and II, Jean-Luc Nancy's theoretical exploration of community connects back to Heidegger, Bataille and Caillois, constructively taking up and extending their thinking. In so doing Nancy recognised that 'community' is a thing in itself – an 'organic communion with its own essence'.[6]

As Nancy's critical reading of Bataille makes clear, community is not simply a compound of members functioning within the strictures of a particular culture but a paradoxical condition of being in which the communitarian exists in an unreconcilable relation with what constitutes the sovereign subject.[7] 'Oneself' is thus not an autonomous individuated subject, but rather an intersection of communication between plural subjects and objects, being and beings, organism and world. Essentially, the construction of *the idea*

of both individualism and community (as that other than 'me' that I can become a constituent member of) is an illusion. Complicit with this illusion is anthropocentrism's masking of the interconnection between 'the human animal' and animal/biological life in general. What the common experience of community reveals to 'me' as it presents to me 'my birth and death, is my existence outside myself' and my being within a 'community of finite beings.'[8] Thus every community is finite, which is why Nancy can assert 'death is indissociable from community.'[9]

In the 'modern world' the 'dissolution, dislocation and conflagration' of community needs to be seen as much a site and mark of unsustainability as is damage to the planet's climate system and to its vital ecological systems (all resulting in significant part from the pursuit of short term economic 'gains').[10] 'Yet just as we must not think that community is "lost" ... just as it would be foolish ... to advocate its return as a remedy for the evils of our society.'[11]

In the demise of the *sacred community*, that sharing which is community has taken its place and has to become 'the sacred.' As such it has to prefigure all human activities if the value of 'being human' is to advance beyond 'its' inhuman propensity. However, the restoration of community is not possible by turning it into an instrumental task, rather it has to be embraced as 'a gift to be renewed and communicated'.[12] Central to this renewal is the revitalisation of myth[13] (that which is believed to be truth – thus myth infuses most of what is taken to be truth, it is truth's provisionality upon which we act – as opposed to being the other of truth). Thus, 'myth tends to become truth itself'.[14] Myth is essential for community; there can be 'no community outside of myth'.[15]

The myth in question in the advocation of 'sacred design' is expressed as 'the community of care'. That is: community as the agency that communally brings the common good into being and cares for it as it cares for 'us' – the inclusiveness of 'us' is the human and the non-human ('us' is life). For community to be sacred it cannot simply be designated and perceived anthropocentrically. True care for 'us' cannot just be care for things human.

Current Understandings

What is understood now as the scope of 'sacred design' is not dramatically different from those that shaped the initial approach to the idea, although there are two major changes in global circumstances that powerfully reframe the significance of what I originally argued in the mid 1990s.

The first event is a protracted one: the widespread recognition of global warming. This phenomenon has arrived on the world's stage as probably the most catastrophic environmental problem since the start of human settlement – ten thousand years ago. The changes it is triggering are recognised to be ever accelerating.

Increased temperatures, once touted not many years ago as the harbingers of possible distant dangers, are now regarded as increasingly likely and are expected to be at the higher end of the 1.4°C to 7°C range.

More heat, extended droughts, rising sea levels, extreme weather events and other climate impacts will have dire consequences especially for many of the world's poorest nations. Potentially there will be hundreds of millions of 'environmental refugees' by the end of the century, which will trigger large population redistributions. In turn, this will increase the risks of conflict.

Event two is also protracted but was made globally visible by what occurred in New York on September 11, 2001. The destruction of the World Trade Center was the iconic event that brought the 'war on terror' into popular consciousness and directly influenced the commencement of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The significance of this overall event cannot be measured simply by statistics like total fatalities, which have been dominantly of huge numbers of civilian non-combatants. The greater significance is the resultant reconfiguration of the world order – seen as 'the west' (especially the USA) lining up against 'the rest' (in particular a large percentage of the global Muslim population). So while the media focus has been on the conflict in the Middle East and Central Asia, the implications will be felt world-wide and extend out into the future politically and economically (this not least because a major sub-text of the scenario is the US acting to secure its access to oil).

Overarching both these events is the imperative to adapt climatically, socially, geo-politically and culturally. And here, cultural change is as crucial as scientific and technological action. Adaptation has been the key to the survival of *Homo sapiens* over its 160,000 years of species existence. In a world continually being made more unsustainable, adaptation will be the absolute key to humanity's future.

No matter the dreams and claims of the proponents of 'sustainable technologies', 'green architecture,' 'sustainable consumption' – such developments in no way match the expansion of the unsustainable. Sadly, much taking place under the rubric of 'sustainability' sustains the unsustainable. For instance, a corporation can now claim a degree of market advantage by having invested in the design and construction of a 'green' headquarters building, but the true measure of the corporation 'green performance' is the sum of the impacts of all its products.

None of this is not to say 'sustainability' actions are not worth doing, but they have to actually deliver sustain-ability, and this means going beyond the notion of economic growth perpetually resting on depleting natural resources. Likewise, and on so many levels, humanity, especially industrialised humanity, seem completely incapable of effectively confronting global inequity, and even more fundamentally questioning (its) finitude.

As far as I am concerned, the partial mainstreaming of the idea of 'sustainability' (and its accompanying evacuation and overloading with plural meanings) prompts the need for disassociation and the creation of linguistic differentiation. So rather than discussing sustainability, I prefer, as indicated above, the more apt and self-defining term 'sustain-ability', which in turn is placed in a subordinate relation to the general temporal category of 'sustainment' – which names both a process and its moment.

On the issue of 'the sacred': my current thinking has been sharpened by the disruption of the simple and prevalent sacred/profane binary. Additionally there is also the renewed interest in the sacred sparked by the appearance of Georgio Agamben's book *Homo Sacer*[16] first published in Italy in 1995 and then in translation in the USA in 1998. However, the way he defined the sacred has been viewed as controversial.

Agamben's concern with the sacred centred on the specificity of 'the sacred man', which draws heavily on the laws of the early period of the Roman Empire, wherein a man judged to have committed a crime against the legal or social order was cast outside the society/culture/community.[17] As such 'he' was no longer deemed to be of the same order of humanity (or even human) but made into a non-human who could be sacrificed without the person who kills him being punished.[18]

Although Agamben discusses the various interpretations that modern scholars make of this contradictory designation of the sacred, and status of the sacred man, he does not position this in a relation to how the sacred has been understood philosophically, theologically and anthropologically within and outside western thought. This leaves him open to the criticism that he simply selected material to fit his argument.

Agamben's view of the sacred was informed by a theo-anthropological position that presented two fundamentally different positions: the first resting on religious laws (prior to their division from penal laws) and the second on of 'an archetypical figure of the sacred that rests with an ethnological notion of taboo.[19] However, what is of interest to us here is the process of objectification – the turning of 'man' into a sacred object.

Hereafter, the transmogrification of the profane into the sacred object acts to reify belief and ritual (in contrast to the way Christian theology anthropomorphises objects – the wafer as the body of Christ). Such a notion of the sacred is not unfamiliar anthropologically, but does it help us understand how and why other forms of the sacred that can animate community are needed? Certainly, the question of the ambiguity of sacrifice as moral capital gained from giving up begs to be considered in this context. It does not take a great deal of imagination to conclude 'we' are not going to get to the future without sacrifice. The implication is that for the sacred to be created, sacrifice has to be a communal ritual.

The West has a long history of exclusion of the Muslim as other. This has been re-infused by a new 'spirit' post 9/11. Ironically, especially when one recalls Nancy's argument, Islamic theology holds the 'umma' – the 'single community' governed by the sacred law of *sharīa* – as a still significant basis of community in a fractured culture.

More generally the power of mythology can be seen in Muslim and other non-western religions as a means to hold sacred places and objects out of the path of the onward march of commodification. While this is an obvious observation, it still begs to be taken more seriously in support of the design of sacred things.

Recasting the Relation between the Sacred and Design

Sacred things arrive by ritual, including sacrifice. They are those things that sustain the sacred. They act to be the focal objects of belief around which community gathers and constitutes its commonality.

The challenge of the present is that this characterisation of the function of the sacred is insufficient to grasp and sustain the interconnectedness of 'our' 'being-in-being' – our lodgement in that greater nature of *physis* (all that is and thus all that life depends upon). Moreover, to deal with the problems of futuring 'life on earth' as we know it there can be no appeal (as Darwin and post Darwinism has shown) to a transcendental agent (God(s)). We are the only the animal able to define (if not solve) a problem, and whatever the problems of sustainment we face there is nobody and no thing to solve them but us. Abstractly, the process is not hard to name: we have to be able to rigorously define the problems; analyse them relationally (rather by linear rationality); and then design solutions (be they directed at forms of erasure, organisation, education, artefacts, or structures). These solutions can never be purely instrumental (which is what we dominantly are disposed to strive to do). They have to be socio-symbolic. They have to be reified in things that act with care no matter the values of users. They have to be implicated in, and assisted by, the sacred.

The sacred (to be 'the sacred') thus cannot be reduced to a binary moral order of: sacred and profane; good and evil, sustainment and the unsustainable. Dialectically, the one cannot be without the other. Ethics is therefore a holding in abeyance. It is an action that strives to reach for *a future* while resisting all that negates *futures* (the unsustainable in dominance in the present).

The task before us is extensive. It will require the efforts of many and, notwithstanding the urgency of the plight of humanity, it will take time.

Futuring is a mythology that demands a new order of imagination – in so far as it cannot be grounded in that which is to hand, it ever remains mytho-logical. The issue of sacrifice is even more demanding to confront.

The investment of effort in design action is what situates action. In order to begin to contemplate the creation of things of care (be they material or immaterial) a futuring mythology has to be present, as does a highly developed conceptual and practical understanding of sacrifice remade. It is as if a higher order of things have to be created that, unlike the sacred objects of religious ritual that require to be gathered in a sacred place, exist and act in spaces of 'the profane'.

In some ways sustainment exists in a nascent condition of recognition. It is that value which we can all, no matter our differences, share. It is a foundation of a common good. Given a particularity by design, it has the potential to be the embodiment of that higher order of thing that is sacred, around which a commonality of belief can accumulate and be held. For this to happen, the capability to care has to be made explicit in terms of what care, at this fundamental level, is and does. This means coming to see care as the structural feature that guides what sustains us in every dimension of our being. It is an implicit rather than explicit quality of the animated nature of things. We already have things that, as such, care – but they are overwhelmed by things that don't (here is the difference between healthy and unhealthy food; technologies that do not damage the environment versus those that do; shoes that protect our feet in contrast to shoes that damage them, and so on). Plus the ethic of care is restricted – it is not directive of, the creation, design function, ongoing designing and post-initial life of the 'thing-itself'.

They may be objects/material assemblages that act or a social-political entity as Bruno Latour would have it, or services. What counts is not what they are but what they do – their (as Heidegger called it) 'thinging' as it embodies and materialises that ethics which is sustainment, which is the 'commonality in difference' acting toward 'care' that we all can share.

We cannot get to designed things of care without sacrifice – deemed here as no mere instrumental task. The act of sacrifice so framed means a practice of encoding, of the objectification, which can be offered up to 'community' to endow a sacred object with the power to attract belief. It also means a public giving way, a giving over. This is to say it has to be broken free from individual acts of 'giving up', especially to gain moral merit points (a *de facto* masking of spiritual self interest often done in the name of another). To grasp sacrifice we have to go back in time, across cultures and into a cultural space where it can be remade. Loss and pain will be not only be unavoidable but essential in the creative act of endowment.

As said, ethics is therefore a holding in abeyance. Its measure is care as futuring enacted. The giving of care to things cannot come from the head alone. It is also a matter of touch and a manner of holding.

Holding implies the hand, and the hand figured strongly in Sacred Design I and II. It was argued that the hand was a 'locus of knowing' and that it 'acts before (and after) the anthropocentric impetus. Along with the ability to design (prefigure) 'it is cast, with language, as that which distinguishes 'man' from (other) animals.'[20] We human beings have no future unless we in all our difference can touch, make and hold that which sustains. The future is literally in our hands. To understand this is to realise that sustain-ability is a craft we have to learn in order to design and make sacred things. I tried to say this before, I have tried again, but no matter how hard I try, comprehension rests not with my words but the reader's disposition to embrace the sentiment and turn it toward action.

Re-reading one's own writing, in my experience, is not a pleasant experience. One is only too aware of the weaknesses that others will have discerned. Yet certainly for me what makes the effort worthwhile is to discover that a certain understanding has been evidently learnt. Fatalistically, this means that all one ever does is to go on saying the same thing over and over again, be it in different ways and hopefully to different people.

So said, what I am saying is: sustainment has myriad faces, and sustain-ability has an incalculable number of ways to bring these faces before 'us' (us here being the proto-community of care). This cannot happen without design (nor without those who deem themselves 'designers' and member of the 'change community' that itself is but one element of the 'community of care'). Such design is sacred – but sacred understood futurally and ethically (rather than historically and religiously).

Sustainment is an unending task, and will ever more be so. All that can be claimed is that the first steps along an unending road have begun.[21]

Notes

1. Which is fundamentally a crisis of inaction in the face of the agents and objects of defuturing – see Tony Fry *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999.

2. Tony Fry 'Sacred Design II' in *Remakings: Ecology Design Philosophy* Sydney: Envirobook, 1994, 113–40. 'Sacred Design I' appeared in *Discovering Design* Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan (eds) Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995.

3. For a full account see Michel Harr *The Song of the Earth* (trans. Reginald Lilly) Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993, 52–56.

4. Georges Bataille and Roger Cailois 'Sacred Sociology and the Relationships between "Society," "Organism," and Being' (November 20, 1937) in Denis Hollier (ed.) *The College of*

Sociology 1937–39 Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 74.

5. Jean Baudrillard *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (trans. Iain Hamilton Grant) London: Sage Publications, 1993, 137-39.

6. Jean-Luc Nancy *The Inoperative Community* (trans. Peter Connor et al.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, 9.

7. Ibid 23.

8. Ibid 26.

9. Ibid 14.

10. Ibid 1.

11. Ibid 34–35.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid 42.

14. Ibid 53.

15. Ibid 13.

16. Georgio Agamben *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen) Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

17. Ibid 71–74.

18. Ibid 79. A particular instance of the practice of exclusion from *bios* that has grown in poignancy is that of the 'muselmann'. Characterised as the most diminished level of humanity in Auschwitz, the 'muselmann' was the human being stripped of everything but the last vestiges of their biological life. They were the dehumanised walking dead robbed of death in that all that they recognisably were was already dead. The 'muselmann' figures, but abstracted, in Agamben's writing as an instance of 'biopower'. What does not get elaborated in his argument is that for camp inmates 'muselmann' meant Muslim – as the name of the lowest of 'human' life. This designation of the 'muselmann' by Jews still echoes. See Gil Anidjar interviewed by Nermeen Shaikh, 'The Muselmann in Auschwitz' *Asia Source* Interview, 15 May 2006.

19. Ibid 72–73.

20. Fry *Remakings* 131–32.

21. Tony Fry *Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics and New Practice* Oxford: Berg, 2009.