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Gift, Design and Gleaning

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William McDonough is regarded by some as one of the most brilliant architects and engineers working today. In the 2002 book he co-authored with Michael Braungart (a chemist) *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, McDonough's approach takes off from a simple observation: we live in a badly engineered world, because the vast amounts of waste (both material and energetic) are needless; and that waste could be virtually eliminated through better design.

The central problem is this: the objects we throw "away" (wherever that is) were not designed to be recycled. They not only let off harmful toxic gasses, but "recycling" them results in more waste – both the extreme amounts of energy required for the recycling, and the residue that cannot be reused. Recycling in this view is a makeshift affair, sometimes effective but more often than not wasteful and dangerous. Scrapping cars results in a metal *mélange* weaker than any of the separate metals that went into the mix: "most recycling is actually *downcycling*: it reduces the quality of the material over time (McDonough and Braungart, 56).

Unless the product is specifically designed to be recycled, enormous amounts of stuff ("technical nutrients")

are left over, end up as dangerous residues, or are recyclable only in a less useful form (plastic that can only be recycled as park benches, for example). In the same way, materials that could be recycled (“upcycled”) entirely as organic (biological) nutrients are instead contaminated with chemicals and therefore can only be dumped. “Downcycling,” then, is recycling in which there is either the production of dangerous residue and leftover waste, or a new “life” for material that is distinctly inferior to the old one (and limited: there will be only a few recyclings until the material finds its way to the dump). For example, recycled newsprint is costly, energy inefficient and full of dangerous chemicals; this kind of process is finite, since reprocessing is possible only a few times until materials are so compromised they must be discarded. “Upcycling” is total reuse, made possible by technical devices designed for disassembly and complete utilization, objects that can be separated into chemicals safe to recycle and organic materials that can actually be used, safely, as fertilizer (in the latter case, McDonough cites carpets that, after use, can be recycled, without any harmful by-products, as compost).

McDonough and Braungart imply that a world of total upcycling would be nothing less than a human version of the world of ants. Drawing on Erich Hoyt’s *The Earth Dwellers: Adventures in the Land of Ants*, McDonough and Braungart write of an animal society – leaf-cutter ants of Central America – that indeed seems more advanced than our own. Imagine an entire economy, an entire world of production, consumption, and reproduction, that is based entirely on “upcycling.” According to McDonough and Braungart, the ants:

- safely and effectively handle their own material wastes and those of other species;
- grow and harvest their own food while nurturing the ecosystems of which they are a part;
- construct houses, farms, dumps, cemeteries, living quarters, and food-storage facilities from materials that can be truly recycled;
- create disinfectants and medicines that are healthy, safe, and biodegradable;
- maintain soil health for the entire planet. (McDonough and Braungart, 79)

McDonough and Braungart are not exaggerating here: Erich Hoyt in his book shows how advanced ants like the Leafcutters farm and eat fungus and nothing else; divide their colony into a number of castes, each with a clearly defined and invariable role; recycle without ceremony or sentimentality everything, including the dead bodies of workers and soldiers who died defending the colony; live in what is called a “superorganism,” a massive society of millions of individuals that acts more as a

single organism living, defending its interests, moving, and dying, than as a collection of individuals with complex and conflicted motives, especially when they deal with spending, accumulation, disposal – and happiness. In other words, for all their sophistication, ants are ants – insects – and not humans. But why bring up that obvious point in a discussion of the most sophisticated variant of recycling (and the most ant-like) – upcycling? Clearly the rhetorical strategy of McDonough and Braungart is more to stress the paradoxical sophistication of ants – they are “saving the earth” (if not making it) through their consumption habits – than their un-human status. This kind of strategy is, moreover, useful: it gets us off our pedestal as humans, shows us that other societies may be in certain ways more advanced, and so on. But it raises problems as well.

It should be stressed that McDonough and Braungart’s ants upcycle, but they do not recycle in a human sense. They do not do so not because they do not use language, are not capable of understanding the meaning of things, and thus the inversions of meaning in irony or parody, but because they do not produce garbage, waste, in the first place. They certainly do not use waste to set themselves apart. Formerly living matter is merely used: we have no indication that ants are disgusted by waste, or that, on the contrary, they revere it, or show it respect (as we would show respect for a dead body). Thus they would be incapable of having any relation with waste: they do not produce waste, only nutrients.

From a reading of McDonough and Braungart, then, we realize that a rigorous recycling entails a rethinking of what it is to be human. This is clearly implied in any argument that puts forward leaf-cutter ants as a model for human activity (recycling): to carry out this imperative, we would need not just to model ourselves on the ants, but to somehow remake ourselves as ants. Sustainable design, in this view, entails a rethinking and a reformulation of the human. It is not just a question of changing design parameters, nor is it even, finally, a question of the nature of the object and how it is designed (other than its total upcyclability). It is instead a call to rethink the very basis of the ground of the consumable object: its relation to life, to animal life, to human life.

My argument is that once we have taken McDonough’s step we need to consider what kind of consuming creature results from his design model. Total upcycling on the model of the ants is certainly inspiring, but it neglects one evident aspect of the human: to constitute itself through one-way waste, to define itself precisely as the animal that casts off, that eliminates, that buries, that disposes of. In this model of human modernity, to waste is to be: I am fully dependent on the trash that I throw “away,” and yet its awayness, its absence, its invisibility, helps constitute me. This is

the “cradle to grave” model that McDonough and Braungart critique, noting in it a carryover not only from modernism (Descartes, for example), but from the one-way Christian tradition of death, burial, and one time only resurrection.

There is, however, another way of framing this discussion of what amounts to the life and death of things. I’m thinking here of Lewis Hyde’s excellent book, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Poetry*, which dates back to 1983. Hyde is well versed in the anthropological tradition of Marcel Mauss, and indeed he has a chapter that deals extensively with Mauss’s reading of potlatch. He never cites and evidently had not read Georges Bataille at the time of the composition of this book, which might not be an entirely bad thing. His ignorance of Bataille allows him to develop some points concerning gift giving that a strict Bataillean reading would not allow.

Hyde stresses the community building aspect of the gift, rather than the risky, apocalyptic side stressed by Bataille. This is certainly a main point of Mauss’s analysis (originally published in 1925) in his *Essai sur le don (The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies)*. Bataille’s later rearrangement of priorities, while valuable, nevertheless may cause one to lose sight of the parameters of gift giving, as outlined by Hyde. These may allow us to think a bit about design, its relation to sustainability, and its future in a world based on the non-circulation of commodities.

Hyde argues that there are two kinds of exchange: that of the gift, and that of capital. In gift-giving the point is to keep the object circulating: when someone attempts to “keep” it for his or her own profit the stymied gift becomes a kind of poison, causing infertility, death. But a circulating gift always leads to an increase of well being. Hyde writes:

The Indian giver (or the original one, at any rate) understood a cardinal property of the gift: whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept. Or, if it is kept, something of similar value should move on in its stead. [...] As it is passed along, the gift may be given back to the original donor, but this is not essential. In fact, it is better if the gift is not returned but is given instead to some new, third party. The only essential is this: *the gift must always move.* (Hyde, 4, italics in original)

As the gift circulates, it accumulates a sacred power, or *hau*, and to this power accrues an ever greater value of the gift. But its circulation is dependent on the fact that the gift perishes, like food. It perishes even if it is not food: *it perishes for the person who gives it away.* The object is consumed in the transaction (Hyde, 9). “There is little difference between [the gift’s] consumption

and its movement. A market exchange has an equilibrium or stasis: you pay to balance the scale. But when you give a gift there is momentum, and the weight shifts from body to body". (Hyde, 9)

So the gift has to circulate, and in circulating it passes through the entire community, bringing it together. It gains in power, in *hau*, as it circulates, and the sense of its increase in worth as it circulates is due to the fact that it acts as an instrument of social cohesion (Hyde, 35). If I grasp it, it withers and dies; if on the other hand I give it, without concern for return, it grows more powerful and more valuable; eventually the equivalent of what I gave, or more, will return. "The gift that is not used will be lost, while the one that is passed along remains abundant". (Hyde, 21)

One understands, then, the perplexity of the native Americans of New England who gave the colonists gifts, only to have them squirreled away. The colonists saw the gifts as something gained, to be hoarded or conserved, whereas the force of the gift was precisely the opposite: its power to circulate indefinitely, over great distances, thereby bringing together many people.

And, beyond that, the gift links people to their environment. The Maori priests of New Zealand return sacrificial game to the forest from which it has come. Hunters take game, but priests return it; it is not just a matter of removing and using something (a commodity, capital), but of receiving game as a gift, and returning it as a gift. Between hunter and forest there is the priest; the sacrificial gift ensures that the forest enters into the gift giving relation with the community, by returning the gift, with augmented value. Game is treated as a "gift of nature," returned, and from that return there come more gifts. Hyde sees in this an ecological significance; we might say that this gift-giving relation between hunter and forest, mediated by priest, is what makes sustainability possible. Hyde writes:

We all know that it isn't "really" the *mauri* [sacrificed birds, the physical embodiment of the forest *hau*] placed in the forest that "causes" the birds to be abundant, and yet now we see that on a different level it is: the circle of gifts enters the cycles of nature and, in so doing, manages not to interrupt them and not to put man on the outside. The forest's abundance is in fact a consequence of man's treating its wealth as a gift. (Hyde, 19)

I have quoted Hyde at some length because I think his discussion of the gift and its power, or *hau*, throws some interesting light on McDonough and Braungart's discussion of the object and its design. The latter certainly valorize upcycling, and necessarily sustainability, but their social model entails neither barter nor gift giving: it is that of the ants, that is, sheer functionality, without any consideration of what we might call the lives of the object.

This is where a consideration of the gift, and of barter, are useful. In barter, or in the exchange economy, the object is bought, retained, used up, and disposed of. Chances are, if it is resold after its initial use it has lost a good bit, if not all, of its value. It does not circulate and gain value; on the contrary, its movement is one way, cradle to grave, and on the way it loses value, to the point of its total worthlessness. At that point it is discarded, buried as “waste.” The modern human as subject of this exchange economy defines him or herself through this one-way waste, this separation from that which progressively loses its value, from that which has no value. Gift giving, on the other hand, as we have seen, entails the indefinite movement of the object, during which it increases in value as it strengthens not the economy *per se* but the community (and the economy as expression of the community). The object is worn out or consumed only for the giver; for the receiver it has accrued value, even when it consists of shells that have circulated for so long that they have worn smooth. From an ecological perspective, gift circulation entails the maintenance of the giver from which one receives: the forest, the environment. Thus the latter is protected through the exchange. It hardly needs mentioning that in barter or money exchange the object, once consumed, is dumped, perhaps to the harm of the environment from whence it came; so too that environment is not treated as a gift giver but as a simple source (mine, forest, ocean) from which material can be extracted, with no thought of repayment (since the source is not capable of being repaid). In the barter or money economy, then, lack of sustainability is virtually inevitable to the extent that in it there can never be any concern with a *return* of the gift, a gesture through which givers recognize the generosity of forest or ocean. As any participant in a gift economy would recognize, without gifting the object withers, the source dries up, the one who selfishly retains is poisoned or goes sterile.

I'd like to call your attention now to a film by Agnès Varda that came out in 2000: *The Gleaners and I*, or, in French, *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*. In this film Varda, a gleaner herself, studies, with her tiny video camera, any number of modern-day gleaners. Some follow the age old practice of gleaning, recovering wheat, grapes, apples, potatoes, even oysters left over after the harvest. Others are modern day gleaners, scavenging in dumpsters for packaged food that has gone beyond its sell-by date. What interests Varda more than the mere act of recovery is the society or community that arises from gleaning. We see homeless people sharing a meal of packaged fish scavenged from behind a supermarket; potatoes that are gleaned because they are malformed (in some cases heart shaped), but which will go into free meals provided by a “resto du Coeur” (restaurant of the heart), and objects of all sorts that are taken from street

dumps, and that will be incorporated into art works. In each case, the scavenged food or objects recirculate, and it seems a direct line from gleaned food or thing to gifted food or thing. As in the “primitive” societies analyzed by Mauss or Franz Boas, these circulating gifts cement the community because the person who gives has also received. Gleaning is not stealing, but taking as one would receive a gift: with the intention of giving back. The contrast between these societies of gleaners, and the larger capitalist society that has created the waste that is being gleaned, is quite stark. We see the very difficult relation between the two kinds of economy, still co-existing to this day.

In Varda’s portrait of a giving community, I would argue, one sees a response both to the modernist model of the human created out of the rejection of trash, and the animal society of perfect recyclers put forward by McDonough and Braungart. In Varda the gift is indeed perishable: in a number of cases the food has to be eaten quickly, because it is just on the cusp of going bad. But the faster it is given, the sooner it is eaten; it’s almost as if this gifting/gleaning economy has stepped up the pace of its traditional role model. And the gift certainly brings a community together, brings it into being.

We have, then, a different version of recycling here, neither animal nor human. We might say it’s posthuman in the sense that the human undergoes a blowback of the rejected object; this is not so much the “primitive” society of the gift givers, but rather a postprosperity society in which gift giving supervenes after the evident economic, ecological and moral bankruptcy of the barter-exchange-usury economy. In this sense, along with the posthuman, we might speak of the postsustainable: as with the *mauri* returned to the forest, here in Varda’s film the garbage as gift, returned to circulation in the community, is also an offering that countermands the model of extraction and dumping. The gleaners take what is left over, they feed on, and give, that which would go straight to the landfill. They open up the dump, set its contents in circulation, break the economy of the standing reserve in which material is mere quantifiable and to-be-dumped stuff. An economy of the sacred, of a gift imbued with its *hau*, gives lie to the unsustainable economy, the pumping and dumping logic that produces mountains of “deformed” potatoes and dumpsters full of perfectly edible fish. Sustainability here is not the product of an ever more maniacal quantification, a cradle to cradle accounting that mandates a recycling possible only through the rigid organization and hierarchy of the ant colony. Rather sustainability now is the after-effect of the gift, it is the generosity of the environment, if we can call it that, responding to our own generosity. Waste equals food, as McDonough and Braungart would say, but the equation now is the result of humans gleaning, that is recovering trash as gift, and setting it

out in to the world. If waste equals food, trash equals gift. It is not so much a planned recycling as a *de facto* – but potentially infinite – circulation. Postsustainability is the after-effect of a corporeal generosity. Postprosperity consumption is post-postscarcity, the return of the sacred in the generosity embodied in the now finite (gleaned) object – finite due to the relative scarcity of “resources,” their *return* as the received but also donated wealth of the “forest” (our world). We know the limits of the forest, as well as the constantly renewed wealth of the gleanings that are incessantly returned to it.

The gleaned object *par excellence* – the “simple” tool that returns as junk, as junked gift, all the while returning a junked energy – can perhaps best be seen in a brilliant parable by Franz Kafka, ‘The Worry of the Father of the Family’. This tiny story presents a tiny character. It is Odradek, the etymological origin of which, the narrator tells us, is unknowable – neither hypothesis (German origin with Slavic influence, and vice versa) “enables you to find a meaning for this word” (Kafka 2007, 72).

The meaningless word supplements a meaningless creature, if one can call it that, which “at first” “looks like a flat, star-shaped spool for thread, and, in fact, does seem to be wound with thread.” Rather than a useful tool, however, the spool is neither a spool, nor even a simple object: the thread it is wound with is not new, as one would expect on any self-respecting spool that serves a purpose; rather around it clusters “only old, torn-off pieces of thread of the most various kinds and colors knotted together and tangled up with one another” (72). Moreover, the faux spool has a kind of leg sticking out of its end, so that, balanced on the leg on one side, the star on the other, “the whole thing can stand upright, as if on two legs” (72).

This is certainly the most minimal creature in modern literature, with the exception, perhaps of some of Beckett’s creatures (but they, at least, are unequivocally “alive”). This “spool” at first seems a simple, inanimate object; yet standing, “as if on two legs,” it gives us the impression that it is kind of alive. For this is a central question of the story: is the narrator giving us an account of a living creature, or is he himself anthropomorphizing a simple (albeit somewhat repulsive) object?

This uncertainty as to the living/inanimate status of Odradek returns at the end of the following paragraph, when the narrator – the “Father of the Family” – states, concerning Odradek: “In any case, it is impossible to say anything more definite about it, since Odradek is extraordinarily mobile and impossible to catch” (72). Here at first we can imagine Odradek running around the house, on his little leg and star, bearing his bits of gleaned thread, and squirming away from anyone who wants to stop him. Yet as the story continues we have less and less to go on. Is Odradek broken? No, because he does not

seem to have any “fractures.” But if he’s not broken – does he or can he serve a purpose? No, because he’s “meaningless.” He is an object, then, neither broken nor perfect (having a use or purpose), neither fully living (sometimes he remains mute “like the wooden thing he seems to be” [73]) nor simply inanimate. He either lives and runs away, or only seems to be displacing himself as he is transported around the house. The latter is suggested when we learn all the places he “stays” in the house: the attic, the staircase, the corridor, the hallway. In this sense Odradek recalls all the little objects that float around a house, disappearing and then suddenly popping up when one least expects them. They are “lost” when we want them (or, as the narrator would say, they may have “moved into other houses”); then they unexpectedly “reappear.” Odradek in this sense would seem to be nothing more than a typical, small household item that seems to have a life of its own, leading an itinerant existence at the margins of our awareness. It is at the margins not only of the narrator’s home life, but of his language as well, since it consistently eludes any attempt to describe it unambiguously. Not only does Odradek elude language; language eludes him, since when he does talk, telling the narrator that he has “no permanent residence,” it is not the speech of a person but of a piece of wood skittering on the floor: Odradek’s laughing reply “sounds more or less like the rustling of fallen leaves.” It could only be produced “without lungs” (73).

But the real core of the story, I think, is the relation between the narrator and Odradek. The “father” seems to resent Odradek because he is convinced the little “thing” will survive him. Odradek, in spite of his status as trash in waiting, or trash returned, will live in the house forever: “can I expect that one day, with his bits of thread trailing behind him, he will come clattering down the stairs, say, at the feet of my own children and grandchildren?” (73). It’s that possibility – the afterlife of Odradek – that the “father” finds “most painful.”

And that’s it – the father’s anxiety before the continued and perhaps eternal existence of this bit of fluff is the central problem we are left with. Why is he so concerned?

Odradek is a discard, so marginal that he wanders just outside of human awareness. He is living and dead, and defies any description that one could apply to him. He is the trash that returns, but not as easily reconstituted material: his trashness shows itself in that his very incorporation into a system (the household, the family, language itself) is impossible. Yet he also insistently asserts himself, reappearing when he is least wanted. Like all trash recycled as *trash*, his disposal is necessary to a fully human existence (that of the “Father of the Family”) and yet his return is as necessary as it is disrupting. He is the one who

indicates the mortality of the family: first the father, and then no doubt all the others. “Human” life, if we can call it that, can only take place in the shadow of Odradek, of the return of the garbage that makes the human possible through its very excision, and which then returns as gift, as supplement, to indicate both its own necessity as well as the necessity and inescapability of the originary defect, the originary lack established by the disposal of garbage. The “father” is both human – the ultimate human, the figurehead of the family – and at the same time posthuman in his fearful recognition of his own finitude, his own profound absence to himself, in and through Odradek’s inevitable return.

The gleaned object is itself therefore a critical object; the gift comes back, conditions, overturns the human while maintaining its difference from the animal. Odradek the animate/inanimate object is an exemplar of the gift; it is always circulating, always tracing the contours of the house, the society. Yet it is not easily captured, it seems to have its own life; when one wants to grab it it is gone. Above all, what it does is affirm its own immortality: the family man realizes that it will still be clattering down steps long after he is gone. On its spool like body bits of refuse, pieces of string, accumulate. It is a gleaner, in other words, and perhaps gleanable; if only it could be nailed down it could perhaps even serve as a conventional spool. But the point is that it can’t be pinned down. It moves, and in so doing it reflects on the mortality of the one who would capture it. In his desire to control, to contain, the father can only expose his own death, his radical insignificance. Before Odradek, the narrow family economy of possession and disposal fails. Odradek is more alive than the father; he is the posthuman scurrying away from the doomed human.

How then does one “design” Odradek? Who designed him? There is some element of *détournement* in his gleaning and reinvention of spool functions. And there is a DIY element there too, the taking of a banal object, magnifying it, tinkering so that it means more or does more than it was ever meant to – even if the “more” that it does is only more not-doing. (But who is doing the tinkering? Who is giving? Is the gift gifting itself?) And perhaps – something the father of the family never thinks of – giving Odradek’s giving himself back to the soil, composting himself, so that waste once again equals food: a process leading to an immortality quite different from the permanence of Odradek’s presence in a number of middle class homes. As his little wooden body breaks down (waste equals food), Odradek’s movement passes from hallways and parlors to the forests from which things are hunted and harvested.

Perhaps that too is a kind of design: seizing the gift in its passage, letting the gift redirect its circuit. Gleaning is after all breaking apart, trying out, recombining, *using against* within the

larger context of social *détournement*. There is a point where design points to non-design, the space of the unknowable where the designer has to let go before his or her own mortality, finitude. Where the designer lets go before the dedesign of the gifted thing. The point at which the thing is given, moves out on its own (lest it rot), is *marked out* (the etymology of designate: *designare*), slips away only to return (from waste to food). The finitude of design, the infinity of circulation. Knowing how far to go before letting go. Design in this sense may mimic writing: a movement that effaces itself in instituting the swerve, the line of advance and interruption. The not-knowing of knowing: the gift entails a design that incorporates what it cannot and must not grasp (for grasping is only the death of the thing designed). What it has to expel, or give, in order to “be” design. The sacrifice of the designer. The unknowability of design, its monstrousness: design working more and more perfectly to be its own undoing.

One gives (or *es gibt*: it is given), but only in ignorance and uncertainty: what will come back? *Will* anything come back?

Notes

1. Hoyt, Erich *The Earth Dwellers: Adventures in the Land of Ants* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.
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