a “product in each of the major shopping centers on earth.” Seven years later, frog had done just that. Today, claims Esslinger, frog has carved out a unique territory in the marketplace that is somewhere between business consulting and a traditional design practice.

Esslinger spends much of the first three chapters of the book describing some of the most salient moments in his early career, such as working closely with strong business leaders such as Steve Jobs, in a deeply personal and colorful tone. He also offers examples of companies that were unsuccessful in their attempts to capitalize on their prior successes such as Motorola’s inability to improve the software for their RAZR mobile phone or Maytag’s focus on the corporation rather than individual products. Both of these companies failed to understand the importance of the user experience of their software and products, and ignored frog’s recommendations. Esslinger attributes the subsequent decline of these companies on the lack of strong leadership with the will and vision to explore the unknown. Instead, he writes, many companies rest on their laurels and remain committed to strategies that, while they may have been successful in the past, fail to lead them into the future.

To readers familiar with design thinking, the main appeal of this book is in learning the details of Esslinger’s professional career while, to those less familiar, the book is a useful primer in some of the leading design strategies and processes used by firms such as frog. However, readers captured by the details of the professional memoir may be disappointed by the dramatic shift of the book’s tone in its second half towards one that is colder, more “objective” and impersonal. At the same time, those engaged in the cutting edge of design strategy may find that the book offers little in the way of new theory or methods. Finally, the book celebrates the tools, methods and processes of the designer (or a kind of hybrid business strategist/designer) in collaboration with business leaders as the key to solving a wide range of business problems. While this speaks directly to the business world’s current fascination with design, and is to be expected from the founder of a design firm, it is overly one-sided.

The latter half of the book is a more straightforward discussion of the latest trends and themes in areas such as sustainability, open source collaboration, outsourcing and fab labs. For example, Esslinger argues that designers have an obligation to help their clients towards greener business models in order to accomplish a paradigm shift with respect to the ways in which businesses have traditionally consumed natural resources in order to continue to produce products for an economy of planned obsolescence. He also stresses the need for close, collaborative relationships between companies and their original design manufacturers (ODMs) as well as new models such as home-sourcing that allow smaller and mid-size companies to leverage local talent and knowledge while sourcing components globally.

One of the most interesting connections that Esslinger makes is that of the link between open source design and sustainability. In particular, he argues that open source approaches to product design embeds both modularity and flexibility, which are likely to support the easy upgrade and replacement of components as well as longer lifecycles for individual products resulting in less material waste. “Instead of today’s “disposable” mentality,” Esslinger writes, “designers will develop products designed for broader and more varied markets, because they will be able to collaborate with a much wider development group to design, customize, and upgrade devices.” While more of a call to action than a reality in the design world, there are many signs that Esslinger’s pairing of these concepts is indeed quite prescient. But, of course, this depends on whether the design world and the business world can work together to walk the fine line between today’s profit and tomorrow’s progress.

Erik Stolterman

Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things
by Jane Bennett
(Duke University Press: London, 2010),
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Through history, humans have debated how to understand and relate to their surrounding reality. We have all heard about societies and tribes that believed that every object and thing has a soul. Today this is commonly seen as a primitive and outdated view, even though there are still those who are attracted to the notion of the ensouled environment. The dominating modern view is instead firmly grounded in the idea that reality consists of the human, spiritual, world of life, and on the other side the dead, material, world of matter. This division of living things from dead things is highly influential in the way humans think about and act upon their world.

However, in modern philosophy there is a new trend that is bringing the importance of objects and matter back into focus. In a new book by Jane Bennett, “Vibrant Matter: A political ecology of things,” one such position is presented. Bennett claims that her ambition is to develop a positive ontology of “matter as vibrant” and to dismantle the divisions between the binaries life/matter, human/animal, and organic/inorganic. It is from a perspective of design interesting to see that the reason for Bennett’s work is not primarily to develop a new philosophy but solving a very practical problem. Bennett is concerned with the way humans relate to and manage our environment. The primary purpose for Bennett is the exploration of ways of thinking about matter that could help convincing people to care for environmental sustainability.

Bennett’s claim is that we need a new understanding of our environments—of our material
“things”—if we want to be able to find strategies for sustainability that are “sustainable.” Bennett writes that if we are able to find a relationship to “things” that are built on another understanding of their intrinsic nature it “might augment the motivational energy needed to move selves from the endorsement of ethical principles to the actual practice of behavior.” With this, she means that we need new incentives, a new motivation, that can give us the energy to engage effectively in behaviors that are positive for the environment. The argument is that it is not enough to intellectually understand that our behavior needs to change; we need to have ethical reasons for actually doing it. And if “things” are seen as co-actants in our world, she believes that we will rethink the way we understand matter and objects and therefore start to act differently.

The way Bennett approaches her purpose is by developing a political analysis that can account for the contribution of “non-human actants.” Bennett is not starting from nothing, she heavily relies on the philosophies of thinkers such as Spinoza, Bergson, and Dreyfus, all whom in different ways have explored notions of vitalism and matter. At the end of the book, Bennett summarizes her own view in something she sees as a “litany” and that summarizes her approach and intention:

“I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that this pluriverse is traversed by heterogeneities that are continually doing things. I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp. I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests.”

Of course, it is difficult to make an argument about “vibrant” or “living” matter today since it feeds into all kinds of ‘new age’ ideas of living matter, spiritual thinking, energy forces, etc. Bennett however presents her ideas with firm reasoning and builds her argumentation on a solid philosophical foundation. For those with an interest in design, it is interesting to see her relationship to a thinker like Bruno Latour. Even though Bennett makes it clear that her approach differs from Latour, it is clear that Bennett can be seen as part of the new broader trend where Latour is a major thinker to other thinkers such as Graham Harman, Peter Paul Verbeek, and what lately has been called an Object Oriented Ontology philosophy. This new philosophical orientation is today seen by some as potentially suitable as a foundation for design theory.

Since the purpose of the book is also to investigate the “political ecology of things,” Bennett takes on the question of what a notion of “vibrant matter” would mean when it comes to political issues. She explores in more detail the possible answers to her question “What, in sum, are the implications of a (meta) physics of vibrant materiality for political theory?” She also explores more concrete issues and consequences of her philosophy when applied to everyday objects. She for instance discusses “edible matter” (food), metal, trash, etc., and what it means when these objects are seen as vibrant matter.

Maybe one of the most unusual (and designerly) aspects of Bennett work is her push for “positive formulations.” She makes a strong argument that a one-sided “demystification” as it is commonly practiced in critical theory “should be used with caution and sparingly.” Bennett writes that evaluation and critique needs to be balanced with positive formulations, in this case, with an understanding of “things” that gives us energy and will to change our behavior in a positive way. But she also writes “Would a discursive shift from environmentalism to vital materialism enhance the prospect for a more sustainability-oriented public?” and she admits that that is an empirical question.

Overall, Bennett presents ideas that are attractive (since they are as she says “positive”) but also somewhat challenging. They lead to new ways of thinking about things and artifacts, and for those of us who are used to think about design, embodied interaction, user experience, etc., many of the ideas are not that far fetched. Bennett also recognizes design or craft as a potential source for more initiated understandings of matter, as she writes, “The desire of the craftsperson to see what a metal can do, rather than the desire of the scientist to know what a metal is, enabled the former to discern a life in metal and thus, eventually, to collaborate more productively with it.”

I am curious to see how Bennett’s and similar new philosophical attempts can and will be translated into more concrete approaches relevant for design. Bennett is herself aware of this need of being more particular, as she writes “And I know that more needs to be said to specify the normative implications of a vital materialism in specific contexts.”

This new evolution of philosophical ideas concerned with the status of “things” and of the material world is highly interesting from a design theoretical point of view, and with Bennett’s work we have another example of why we need it and how it could be used. I am convinced that we will see many more examples of this philosophical development in the near future.

2 Ibid., 60.
3 Ibid., 122.