General

Change One Thing, and You Change the World

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Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ZKM / The MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.) and London, 2005, ISBN 0262122790

How does democracy work? Or, in contemporary terms, how can democratic politics function in today's network society? And what is the role of the arts in those politics? A schoolchild can practically explain how democracy works: the various economic, religious and cultural groups in society strive for more or less permanent representation, by parties who defend the interests of their own rank and file, in most cases at the cost of other people's interests, in local, regional, national and supranational parliaments. Consequently, whenever there is an issue to be settled, there is at first a lot of bickering and infighting, after which decisions are reached to which all the parties promise to reconcile themselves – for the while at least.

This method of doing politics is showing strain due to globalization, especially the globalization of business. As a result, decisions are made that exert profound effects (ranging from enhancement to destruction) on local, regional, national and supranational life, without the existing popular representative bodies having much say in those decisions. Examples are legion: industries decamping to low-wage countries, dam building, continental borders being sealed against the hordes of outsiders seeking a better life, expansion of the Internet, global warming, rising sea levels and so on. In the circumstances, democracy hardly operates through parliaments any more. Yet democratic processes are still possible.

These alternative democratic processes always coalesce around specific themes and on specific platforms (which may or may not be intended for those themes). The World Bank, for example, has to deal with NGOs that object to its financial policies because they believe they promote more CO2 emissions and hence accelerate climate change.[1] Groupings of various kinds from all around the world rally around an issue and in a venue, which may range from a real-world conference to a virtual forum, and bring to bear a cocktail of arguments, media and actions, which resembles a democratic process and leads to a more or less democratic conclusion.

Note that I say 'resembles' and 'more or less'. For this is an extra-parliamentary brand of democracy; or, more exactly, a parliament or 'assembly' is organized for each theme by all manner of interest groups, persons, corporations and media. And in this parliament, through discussion and pressure, a decision is reached with which the various groupings can live (sometimes literally) for the time being. *Dingpolitik* is what Bruno Latour calls this in his introduction to *Making Things Public*, a catalogue published in conjunction with the similarly named exhibition held in the Zentrum für Kunst en Medientechnologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe from March to October 2005, with Latour and Peter Weibel as curators.

The exhibition was a little frustrating because it offered so much to read and study that it was impossible for a visitor to digest it all in one day. The catalogue should have dealt with this objection, but it did not appear until after the exhibition was over. The reason for the delay in publication is now evident: the catalogue is 1072 pages thick. It contains essays by dozens of internationally renowned authors from many different scientific disciplines, from art history and art criticism; and these are supplemented by pieces written by relatively free-range essayists, artists and philosophers from all over the world, plus a number of deceased literary figures. All the exhibition's themes are thoroughly gone into, so do not despair if you missed the exhibition at the ZKM. Just take a year off to read this slab of erudition.

The 'things' to be made public are meant to be taken literally. The word 'thing' refers not only to objects and issues, but also to the Althing, the parliamentary democracy which the Vikings established in Iceland. A 'thing' is something, a subject or a theme, which brings people together despite their divisions: it is precisely because they don't agree that they want to talk about it. A thing is not a 'matter-of-fact', Latour writes, but a 'matter-of-concern'. A public congregates around each thing, and the form in which people gather around that thing or issue may be termed a parliament or an 'assembly'. An assembly of this kind does not consist of elected party members who represent other people, but of concerned individuals and groups who feel involved with the particular issue and who congregate around the thing in a certain place.

Parliamentary politics without representation: how does that work? That is the subject of this book by Latour and Weibel. Bruno Latour, known as a philosopher for his science studies, and well-known from an earlier major exhibition at the ZKM and its splendid catalogue, *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art* (2002), formulates the new perspective on democracy in his introduction, 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public'. Peter Weibel, the director of the ZKM, incorporates the new outlook into a traditional *grand récit* on democracy as a regulated form of class struggle in his epilogue, 'Art and Democracy: People Making Art Making People'.

After a fascinating exposé of the appearance and disappearance of the thing in art from antiquity to the present, Weibel poses the theory that only interactive media art is truly democratic, for it consists of things that we may not only look at, but also may do something with, in accordance with the artist's instructions. Things, in interactive art, are not only depicted and represented as in painting, sculpture, photography, film, etcetera, but also present in reality; and they elicit real-world behaviour from the viewer. Interactive works of art are no longer closed, autonomous entities but nodes in networks, open and relative. They are more like services than objects.

The thousand pages of text by the dozens of authors, which are sandwiched between the rather brash introduction and epilogue, respond to Latour's and Wiebel's theses: they support or undermine them historically, they mitigate them, they turn them on their head, they refute them, they sharpen them, they make them more specific and so on. It's fascinating reading matter, I cannot deny: a feast of a book, not least because of its many attractive illustrations.

Still, there is something odd going on here. Despite the countless disciplines and many different countries represented among its authors, the book cannot be truly called interdisciplinary. The texts do not connect to one another; they are all illustrations of and commentaries on Latour's and Weibel's standpoints – just as the works of art in the exhibition were all illustrations of and commentaries on those ideas. Real interdisciplinary research is generally organized around a single theme or thing (also known as a 'boundary object') which forms a link between the different disciplines, as a point of concentration in

the ramified network of research. Here the boundary object is the very phenomenon of the thing or the issue, together with its derivatives: the assembly, representation, knowledge networks, political passions, parliamentary techniques and so on.

That is something like being committed to commitment – a phenomenon familiar from the *engagée* art of recent decades. 'What is it like to be socially involved?', was the question addressed by many a young artist (and not 'I feel involved with this group of people or this theme, so what kind of art should I make?') In the book, philosophers, scientists and artists wonder: 'What would it be like to be really concerned and passionate about a theme in the real world of today, instead of about concepts, media, the theories of other philosophers, scientists and artists, and so on. Just imagine we weren't postmodern. What would we see, experience, discover and be capable of?'

This new approach proves surprisingly productive. An endless stream of striking observations appear in the pages of *Making Things Public*. But the aim of the contributions is not to achieve an interaction between disparate areas of knowledge in order to generate a different kind of knowledge; the goal is rather to paint a picture of what contemporary democracy ought to be like if it is to be truly democratic once more (for the idea that all is not well with democracy is one on which all the authors tacitly agree). The crux is an ethical question: what, as Latour wonders, is the nature of 'good government' in the 21st century? And does the new attitude yield 'good art', as Weibel claims?

I cannot help thinking of my own past. Back in the 1980s, the 'public' of the squatters movement coalesced around the theme of the housing shortage in Amsterdam and formed a 'parliament', which met in a network of squats bound together by telephone calls and bicycle routes. Derided by the established political left as a 'single issue movement' ('back in the 1960s we tried to change the whole of society, but you're concerned with just one little thing'), the model of concrete action unaccompanied by ideology, of aiming for concrete results in the here and now, suddenly seems to have a future. As an ex-squatter, I have no quibbles with that. But did squatting deliver good government and good art? Well, maybe it did. Perhaps interactive art had its origin in squatting. Perhaps that is why I love it. And perhaps that is why, despite all the criticisms I can level at it, I find *Making Things Public* such a good book that I have no reservations in recommending it to you. You can't always be interdisciplinary, can you?

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Footnotes

1. The example of the World Bank comes from Noortje Marres' dissertation *No Issue, No Public: Democratic Deficits after the Displacement of Politics* (University of Amsterdam, 2005).

Tags

Art Discourse, Democracy, Philosophy, Public Domain, Public Space

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