On Art and the Democratization of Things

Politics at Issue

Peter-Paul Verbeek

Essay – September 28, 2012

Art can play an important role in drawing attention to the influence of things, according to Peter-Paul Verbeek, Professor of Philosophy of Technology at the University of Twente. It can enable people to see through the political role of things and experiment with it.

Since 1991, when Bruno Latour convened the first Parliament of Things, the political dimension of our material culture has continued to occupy minds. When politics is no longer just a question of people, but also of things, it indeed has tremendous consequences for our democracy. After all, the political role of material objects is not the product of democratic decision-making but of the ideas of a few well-intentioned designers, at best. The recognition that things are politically charged is therefore also a serious challenge for politics. Democracy is literally at issue.

In this contribution, I would like to investigate the democratic challenge of the 'Politics of Things' in relation to a recent political approach to things: the 'nudge' approach, which has been defended since 2008 by American intellectuals Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler. A nudge is a tiny push, a small stimulation that guides people in a certain direction. Our material world is full of such nudges, varying from photocopying machines with a standard setting of single-sided copies to the image of a fly depicted on some urinals to tempt men to aim for it. Thaler and Sunstein advocate that we design these nudges in an optimal manner, so that we can guide our own behaviour in directions we consider beneficial.[1]

As such, they are trying to couple a democratic ideal with the notion that things have political impact. They refer to their approach as 'libertarian paternalism': on the one hand, they are advocates of – paternalistically – steering human behaviour with the help of nudges, while on the other they focus attention – in libertarian fashion – on human freedom and autonomy in how we deal with those nudges.

The question, however, is whether this libertarian-paternalistic attempt to tame the politics of things is tenable. In the libertarian as well as the paternalistic element of Thaler and Sunstein's approach, people are lord and master: nudges are the result of paternalistic human design, yet at the same time, the people subjected to this paternalism always have the libertarian possibility of ignoring it. As opposed to this libertarian attempt to turn the 'politics of things' into human politics, I will show that art can actually make the politics of things come into its own and flourish. Instead of pulling out its teeth, art can experiment with the power of things. And that is precisely where the democratic answer to the challenge of the politics of things lies.

A Brief History of the Parliament of Things

The idea that things are politically charged was already effectively formulated back in the early 1980s by Langdon Winner, in his now classic article 'Do Artifacts Have Politics? '.[2] On the basis of three illustrative technologies – viaducts, tomato harvesting machinery and nuclear power plants – Winner shows that material objects can have a political impact.

His example of the overpasses over parkways on Long Island, New York has become the most legendary one. Winner shows that these overpasses, designed by architect Robert Moses, contain a racist political programme. Namely, they are built so low that only automobiles can pass beneath them, and not busses. In this manner, Moses regulated the accessibility of certain parts of Long Island. Since only the white population could afford a car at that time, these viaducts made it difficult for other population groups to reach certain places, such as Jones Beach. Winner' s analysis has been subjected to the requisite criticism, by the way, because there are bus timetables showing that the beach actually was accessible by public transport. [3] But that does not affect the value of the example: things are most certainly capable of exerting great political influence.

Winner's other examples show this at least equally well. Whereas the politics of Robert Moses' viaducts were purposefully introduced, there are also material objects that implicitly exert their influence. The tomato harvesting machine is a clear example of this. The introduction of this machine radically changed tomato cultivation. Winner shows that these machines compelled a tremendous increase of scale. With this speedy and efficient method of harvesting, a farmer could produce many more tomatoes at a much lower price. Other farmers accordingly had to follow suit; otherwise they could not survive the competition. But the initial investment for such machines was so huge that fusions between farms became necessary. Moreover – and not lastly – these rough machines were not good at handling juicy, soft tomatoes because the machinery often squashed them. New races of tomatoes were therefore necessary, which unfortunately are less tasty, but can be easily picked by machine.

A third form of the politics of things can be called 'intrinsic'. Winner illustrates this form of politics with the example of the nuclear power plant. Due to the great complexity of such a plant and the huge risks and dangers attached to it, this technology requires a very hierarchical operational structure. When a calamity occurs, there is no time for calm democratic decision-making: action must be taken immediately. Democracy does not fit with a technology like this: a hierarchal organization is intrinsically bound to it.

In the work of Bruno Latour, the politics of things gains a political-theoretical dimension. Latour develops a metaphysics in which the separation between subject and object disappears. Instead of starting from an a priori separation between the human and the non-human, he focuses on relations between entities. Reality consists of ' actants' – acting entities, human and nonhuman – that are connected through networks and enter into relations with one another. Practices, truths and theories arise in this manner. In order to show that material objects expressly play a role in the design of society, Latour even literally speaks of a 'Parliament of Things' in his *We Have Never Been Modern*. [4] Society is not only made by humans but also by nonhumans.

In his books *Politics of Nature* (2004) and *Making Things Public* (2005), Latour further works out his vision of the politics of things. [5] Here, one of the central lines in his approach is the question of how the concept of 'representation' in our representative democracy can be developed so that it loses its exclusively human interpretation. For Latour, politics is also about configurations of humans and nonhumans, all of which must be adequately represented on the political *agora*. A symmetrical politics, which takes both human and nonhuman matters seriously, requires not just representation of the people, but also representation of the matters that are at issue. [6]

And those matters can vary from a hole in the ozone layer to the budget deficit, and from unemployment to integration. Politics is about the world, and this is why things as well as people are represented in parliaments.

Such representations do not have the character of 'matters of fact', according to Latour, but of 'matters of concern'. They connect people not because they are factually 'true', but because they embody a common involvement that includes all of the diversity of viewpoints related to a matter. In the Dutch language, the word 'thing' (*ding*), indeed has a strong etymological connection with such involvement in social questions: something can be 'at issue' (*in het geding*) and we can 'begin an action against' something (*geding*). In Scandinavian languages, the word 'thing' is often even used to indicate parliament itself. The politics of things is wherever something is at issue (*in het geding*): people gather around the question, and politics takes place in this double representation of the people and reality.

In the 1990s, Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis developed his own special political version of Latour's ideas. In 1995 he published an article titled 'De moralisering van de apparaten' (the moralization of technology) [7], in which he argued that it's time to put a stop to the constant moralizing in the environmental discourse. Were some environmental activists to have their way, even the smallest details of our existence would be a topic of moral reflection, according to Achterhuis. The number of lights we burn in the house, the length of time we spend taking our daily shower, the efficiency of our driving style – everything is morally charged. At a certain point, such constant reflection makes ordinary life impossible.

Instead of moralizing *each other*, it's time for us to start moralizing *technology,* states Achterhuis. And he reinforces his case by creatively appealing to Latour. In 1992, Latour had already developed a framework for analysing the influence of technologies on people's behaviour. Latour refers to this influence of material things on people by the term ' script': just as the script of a film or a play prescribes who says or does things at a given moment, an artefact can also prescribe actions. [8] A speed bump requires people to step on the brake at certain places. Some cars compel the driver to wear a seatbelt, since otherwise they will not start.

Latour sees this influencing of behaviour through technology as a form of 'solidified morality'. People who complain about the decay of moral principles in society should take a good look around them, says Latour. Our material surroundings are bursting with morality, for those who want to see it. Morality is not exclusively human, but also material.

Achterhuis applied Latour's analysis to the design practice of engineers. If technological artefacts steer our actions, as Latour shows, then it would be best for designers to anticipate this in a smart manner. We would then be delegating part of our moral responsibility to the technology with which we surround ourselves. In the same way that automatic turnstiles are designed to prevent people from entering the metro without a ticket, technologies can be designed that elicit environmentally friendly behaviour and discourage environmentally unfriendly behaviour, such as a speed limiter in automobiles or a water-saving shower head.

Behaviour-influencing technology, according to Achterhuis, thus forms a necessary answer to the perpetual state of reflection that comes with constantly taking a moral approach to our behaviour. People can create a material environment for themselves that embodies the principles they wish to hold themselves to, but which they are sometimes incapable of holding to in practice.

This liberating effect of technology was not recognized by everybody as such, however. There soon came sharp protest. [9] If people are steered by artefacts behind their backs, then technology would be the boss, instead of people themselves. And if people do

something because artefacts prompt them to do it, there is no longer any question at all of a moral choice but simply of steered behaviour; moreover, that steerage escapes democratic control. According to these critics, a plea for the moralizing of our material surroundings in fact means the end of ethics. When people are morally steered by technology, they give up their own autonomy. And that can't be the intention, surely?

And with that, the pressing central question of the politics of things is on the table. Isn't the politics of things the end of human politics? Don' t people become morally lazy when things continually steer them in a moral direction? If we leave politics to things, aren't we forfeiting the crown jewel of humanity?

Libertarian Paternalism and the Taming of Things

Precisely at this tension between being steered and maintaining auton omy, Richard Thaler and Cass Sun stein have found an answer. In their book *Nudge*, they make a case for designing our material surroundings so that it influences us in a positive sense without tak ing control away from us. [10]

The central idea in their approach is that the choices people make are to a considerable extent organized and pre-structured by our material sur roundings. When we have to make choices, two systems work together in our brains: an 'automatic system' and a 'reflexive system'. Most of our decisions are ones that we do not think about: we make them automatically. But for some decisions, we really have to stop and think: they require reflection and critical distance. Our automatic system is nowadays organized by our material sur roundings to a significant degree. For example, when fried snacks are within reaching distance in a company's canteen and the salads are tucked behind refrigerator doors, there' s a good chance that many people will choose the less healthy food. The layout of the canteen gives a nudge in a certain direction here.

We must learn to think critically about these nudges. By designing them better, we can influence our automatic system in a desirable man ner – for instance, putting the unhealthy food in places in the can teen that are more difficult to reach than the healthy food. Thaler and Sunstein speak here of 'choice architecture': the way in which choice sit uations are organized and our choices are pre-structured. If the majority of us want many donor organs to be available, but the stand ard option is that people are not a donor – so that people have to go out of their way to become one – then this situation holds a certain contradiction. It is better to bring the stand ard option in line with the broadly shared view, and make it an explicit choice to *not* be a donor.

Dealing with choice situations in this creative manner and introducing nudges in the right direction leads to more desirable routines and automa tisms. But the explicit perpetration of choice architecture does not mean that the reflexive system is com pletely shut off. For Thaler and Sun stein, it is very important that the built-in nudges always remain open to discussion, and can move from the automatic to the reflexive system. This is why they call their approach 'libertarian paternalism'. It is pater nalistic because it exposes people to well-meant nudges in a direction that is considered desirable. But at the same time it is libertarian, because these nudges can always be ignored or undone. Just like everyone is currently free to use both sides of the paper when copying, even though the standard setting is one side, no one should be forced to eat a salad and pass up the croquette in a 're-nudged' cafeteria.

So Thaler and Sunstein's approach seems to offer a way out of the dilemma between behavioural influence and autonomy raised by Achterhuis's proposal to moralize artefacts. Since we can explicitly reflect on the nudges that are given to us, we still have the possibility of taking control again. There is always an opt-out: by drawing on our reflexive system, we can step out of the steering automatism. Thaler and Sunstein are not talking

about shutting off our reflex ive system, but about ‘ setting’ our automatic system in a good way. The paternalism that emanates from the steerage to which we subject our selves is thus always compensated by the libertarian mould in which that paternalism is cast. We need a kind of paternalism such that we do not have to give up the libertarian character of our society.

Nevertheless, the question here is the extent to which Thaler and Sun stein have actually found a way out of the tension between autonomy and steerage. The fact of the matter is, their libertarian coloration of the ‘choice architecture’ they propose places a rather big emphasis on human autonomy. And that’s pre cisely where the shoe pinches in the criticism of Achterhuis’s proposal for the moralization of technology. Namely, analyses of technology’s social role, such as those of Winner and Latour, make it clear that tech nology *always* plays an intermediary role in the actions of people. The role of technology is so fundamental that we must not pretend we can make ourselves entirely independent of it. What’s more, those who refuse to think about desirable forms of behaviour-influencing technology in fact withdraw from the responsibility of putting that mediation in a desirable form. By suggesting that it is possible for there to be nudges that people could entirely avoid, Thaler and Sun stein fail to appreciate how fundamental choice architecture is to every technological design.

A good example in this context is technology that influences our driving behaviour. It so happens that in some circles there is a tremendous aver sion to the speed trap. Various web sites even show detailed photo reports of molested speed cameras: they are shot, torn down or set on fire because they supposedly limit the freedom of automobilists. However, these speed trap assailants do not sufficiently realize that their urge to drive fast is not a product of free choice either. Over the years, automo biles have become increasingly safe, owing to strong chasses, airbags and anti-lock braking systems. At the same time, most cars easily can go double the maximum speed limit, and motorways are so spacious that it is no difficult task to drive on them at much too high a speed.

This combination of a feeling of safety and an inviting material infrastructure quickly sends an implicit invitation to step on the accelerator a little harder. Those who think that traffic mishaps can be dealt with through the use of speed traps and information campaigns without daring to get their hands burnt by, for instance, making a speed limiter compulsory, are therefore choosing the wrong path. To be invited by your car to drive fast on the one hand, and to have the material world around that car blow the whistle on you on the other, is indeed a very double message.

Instead of choosing technology that gives people the impression they can back out of it, it would seem more sensible to design the inevitable influence of technology in such a way that it can count on sufficient demo cratic support. As soon as it is clear that all technology plays an interme diary role in people’ s actions in one way or another, it is in fact actually immoral to refuse to use this insight in a responsible manner. If we are invited by our material environment to jeopardize our own lives and that of others, we must not only try to change people, but also the material environment itself. The insight that technology and human actions are inseparably interwoven charges us with the responsibility to develop technology in such a way that its influence on human action gets a desirable shape.

Art as the Democratization of Things

But now aren’ t we back to square one? Doesn’t this plea for behaviour influencing technology still lead to a technocracy, such as was feared about Hans Achterhuis’s proposal for the moralization of technology? Won’t people become the slaves of technique if we choose this path?

That is still doubtful. After all, this reasoning can also be turned around: *not* accepting the above-mentioned responsibility implies that we are leaving the influence of technique on behaviour entirely up to technicians. And they generally design things without explicitly anticipating the effect that things have on behaviour. This is precisely what would produce a technocracy, whereas Achterhuis's argument makes it possible to accept the responsibility that comes with increased insight into the relation ships between technology and society.

Seen from this perspective, wanting to maintain libertarianism is therefore not a very adequate answer to the resistance against behaviour influencing technology. You might just as well be against gravity; the influence of technology on our lives is always there, whether we want it or not.

But then, doesn't that mean that we are playthings of technology with no will of our own, and simply must recognize that we have hardly anything to say about our own lives? Neither would I want to draw that conclusion. The fact is, denying the existence of a human autonomy with regard to technology still does not have to include the denial of human freedom. First of all, people can design the material world that steers them in a democratic matter and in total freedom and responsibility, as long as there is room for this in design practices and political debates. Moreover, living in such a morally loaded material world is not by definition oppressive, for people can still be free in their ability to relate to how technology influences their exist ence. Without being able to avoid that influence, they still can choose to design their lives in a certain manner in interaction with that technology.

Both of these forms of critical appropriation of the politics of things require that people learn how to interpret the influence of things and relate to it in a creative manner. This is precisely where art has a crucial democratic significance. Artists can experiment with the politics of things: they draw attention to a matter, turn it into an experience, rewrite it. And above all, they can enable people to see through the political role of things and play with it.

Some forms of artistic appropria tion of technology can be called radi cal, or even plainly subversive. A by now classic example is the use of security camera networks by artists as a way of recording their performances. In this manner, they turn the anonymous spying of security guards into an explicit spectator's role, and the condition of being anonymously spied upon into an explicit perfor mance for the camera. The entire configuration of watching and being watched is thus given a radically new interpretation. Moreover, in some cases it turns out to be a legal right to ask for the video recordings made by security cameras, as a result of which the power relations are reversed, and camera surveillance can be used in order to obtain free video recordings of performances. Clearly, the use of security cameras like this is a rewriting of their built-in politics. The violation of privacy is transformed into a publicly accessible video recording.

At least as interesting, however, are the kinds of artistic experiment that approach the politics of things not as an undesirable intruder, but as a self-evident part of society. A striking example here is the work *De Coupé* by Yvonne Dröge Wendel and Lino Hellings in De Bieslandhof care centre in Delft (2008). *De Coupé* (the train compartment) is a publicly accessible art installation specifically intended for geriatric institutes. In this work of art, people can withdraw from the world for a short or longer period and experience a quiet journey by train. Visitors sit on train seats, and the windows of the compartment are in fact screens on which a landscape slowly rolls by. Many people find it very pleasant to sit in there for a while. It turns out that Alzheimer patients in particular draw a lot of benefit from this work of art. The restlessness that often characterizes their behaviour decreases noticeably when they are in *De Coupé* . Their attention playfully focuses on the landscape rolling by, which makes them relax.

In an implicit fashion, *De Coupé* reveals many political dimensions of public space in nursing homes as well as in public transport. First of all, the work shows how poor the rapport sometimes is between the politics of the built environment and the needs of the people who find themselves in that environment. The playful combination of stimulation and relaxation that *De Coupé* offers turns out to be a better environment for some people with dementia than their ordinary surroundings. This is how a work of art makes it possible for us to be aware of the hidden politics of things and to experiment with that. Especially in health care, there is a world to be won in this regard.

But *De Coupé* also closely exam ines the experience of public space that the train offers. The public nature of the train proves to embody a form of intimacy, and the speed of the train creates a form of relaxation. *De Coupé* invites collective use and conversation, whereby the shared experience of the passing landscape works as a connecting element. Moreover, the work plays with the entire specific relation that the train establishes between the traveller and the landscape. This relation has become part of our cultural reper toire by now, as a remarkable hybrid of rest and movement. As such, *De Coupé* places itself in a tradition of analyses of train experiences so beautifully described in Petran Kockelkoren' s book *Technology: Art, Fair ground and Theatre*. [11] Kockelkoren writes how the train originally caused sensations of alienation: you saw the landscape flashing by, while hearing the sounds of the train and smelling the odours of your fellow passengers. There were even neurological syndromes associated with this. Now that the train has become simply a part of our palette of relationships with nature, an work of art like *De Coupé* is capable of investigating that 'train relationship' itself and fitting it into our daily lives in new ways. As a result, *De Coupé* is not only an interesting technological installation, but can also be understood as an exposition of the politics of things of geriatric institutions and the train.

Visual art makes use of the same medium as does the politics of things: materiality. And that is why art is precisely what makes it possible to have a critical but constructive rela tion with the politics of things. In contrast to libertarian paternalism, art does not try to minimalize the politi cal effect of things but instead takes it extremely seriously. Rather than seeking ways of escaping the paternalistic politics of things in the libertarian manner, art enters a creative relationship with those politics. And this is what makes art pre-eminently political – but with other means.

Peter-Paul Verbeek is Professor of Philosophy of Technology at the University of Twente. His work concentrates on the relation between human beings and technology, and its ethical aspects.

Footnotes

1. R. Thaler and C. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
2. L. Winner, 'Do Artifacts Have Politics? ', in: *The Whale and the Reactor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
3. See S. Woolgar and G. Cooper, 'Do Artefacts have Ambivalence? ', *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 29 (1999) no. 3, 433449.
4. B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Translation of: *Nous n' avons jamais été modernes* (Paris: La Dé couverte, 1991).
5. B. Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
6. B. Latour and P. Weibel, *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).
7. H. Achterhuis, ' De moralisering van de apparaten', *Socialisme en Democratie*, 52 (1995) no. 1, 3-11.
8. B. Latour, 'Where are the Missing Masses? – The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts', in: W.E. Bijker and J. Law (eds.), *Shaping Technology / Building Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).
9. H. Achterhuis, *De erfenis van de utopie* (Amsterdam: Ambo, 1998
10. Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*, op. cit. (note 1).
11. P. Kockelkoren, *Technology: Art, Fairground and Theatre* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2003).

Tags

Art Discourse, Democracy, Design, Philosophy, Public Space

This text was downloaded on November 6, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/on-art-and-the-democratization-of-things