

"Making Things Public": Zentrum Fur Kunst Und Medientechnologie

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The night before my visit to "Making Things Public," I had a bizarre dream: After a modification in the electoral process, and because the major political parties were not able to come up with a fully legal candidate, the State Assembly, urgently convened, had appointed Bruno Latour, the philosopher and sociologist of science, President of the French Republic! The new chief of state immediately announced a presidential regime change and the inauguration of the Sixth Republic. Another strong decision: He did not appoint a single commerce or finance minister but surrounded himself instead with a circle of economists of various orientations. But the strangest thing was the touching memory of the philosopher-president's press conferences: Organized in a lecture hall in the Ecole des Mines, France's prestigious graduate school of science, rather than in the press room at the Elysee Palace, they ended systematically with a lecture by one of Latour's students! Holding forth on the social life of flies or the idea of parliament in Machiavelli, these scholarly presentations signaled a will to govern in cognizance of the social and political sciences through an open interdisciplinarity between scholars and politicians.

In short, as though in anticipation, this dream floated in one of those "atmospheres of democracy" that gave the subtitle to this exhibition, curated by Latour and ZKM director Peter Weibel. Democracy was part of the curatorial process, nourished as it was by collaborations between artists and scientists, ethnologists, sociologists, and philosophers, the fruit of long preparation and regular meetings at Latour's Paris home. And it entered into the viewer's experience too, for instance with *The Phantom Public*, 2005, a work by Michel Jaffrennou and Thierry Coduys whereby the public can vary the lighting and sound of the exhibition at whim. Latour and Weibel redefine the exhibition as a place of reflection and not as a strictly aesthetic medium. Latour calls this form a "Gedanken-Austellung"--a thought exhibition, akin to what philosophers refer to as a thought experiment. "Making Things Public," writes Latour, "is not exactly an art show, nor is it a political rally, but an experimental assembly of assemblies." Indeed, one comes across all sorts of assemblies in the show: from a documentary film by Pierre Lemonnier and Pascale Bonnemere on the way in which democracy and its elections are transported by helicopter to the Anka people of Papua, New Guinea, to a section devoted to the famous fresco by Lorenzetti in Siena, *Il Buono e il Cattivo Governo* (Bad and Good Government), 1338-39, by way of models of English and Athenian parliaments, and via Hobbes's *Leviathan*, not to mention Peter

Sloterdijk's stunning *Instant Democracy: Pneumatic Parliament, 2005*, an inflatable assembly that can be parachuted into the desert and ready to use in zones experiencing a crisis of democracy.

To rethink politics today, according to Latour, is to question more seriously what connects us to things; it is to find the place accorded to the *res in the res publica*--the places where we assemble, but also the science labs, supermarkets, financial arenas, and even rivers, fauna, landscapes. With the rock fractures collected by Olafur Eliasson or the film *The Lottery of the Sea, 2005*, by Allan Sekula, the "cosmopolitics" dear to Latour the philosopher finds its way here, a way of thinking that encourages us to broaden the political realm to include nature and to pose the political question another way: What air, what democratic atmosphere, do we want to breathe from now on?

Translated from French by Jeanine Herman.

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