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This essay presents reviews of *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (ZKM Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe/The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2005, 1072 pages); *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* by Graham Harman (Open Court Publishing Company, Chicago, 2002, 256 pages); *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* by Graham Harman (Open Court Publishing Company, Chicago, 2005, 280 pages); and *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design* by Peter-Paul Verbeek (translated by Robert P. Crease; Penn State University Press, 2005, 264 pages).

The four books considered here have one thing in common: they all have something to say *to* design, in spite of either not saying anything directly about it, or saying something slight. The point of reviewing them is thus to expose what this 'something' is. These publications also indicate the emergence of what I am going to call 'object-thing philosophy'. This development is welcomed, but still inadequate. The form that this philosophy will take, and to what it is directed, is still contested. As was learnt from Hans-Georg Gadamer a long time ago, bias is unavoidable: we either admit or conceal it (in the illusion of 'balance'). So, this review is biased. It assumes the potential significance of engaging objects and things is neither limited to the worlds of design or philosophy but rather begs to be lodged in the forming 'ecology of mind of sustainment' – a mind essential in facilitating futuring, a mind in the ownership of public culture. As such, 'object-thing' philosophy has the potential to contribute to creating a diverse response to the convergent political and theoretical *lacuna* that characterises 'now'.

It is evident to vast numbers of thinking people around the world that existent forms institutionalised politics are incapable of dealing with the meta-problems facing humanity. In fact, these problems have in large part been brought into being by policies and practices associated with those economic and political ideologies that created, and still support, the current world order. The kind of problems implied here are the likes of: massive climate instability as a result of global warming (with associated global geo-demographic changes, including a predicated vast increase in environmental refugees); the inequity and afterlife of western colonialism embedded in 'globalisation' now amplified by digitalised capitalism; the mostly invisible and viral growth of the 'long war' between modernising and anti-modern fundamentalisms; and, the danger of nuclear proliferation in response a looming oil based energy crisis and the rekindled US fear of China.

It is crystal clear that neither the weary humanism, the complacent scientism of lingering Enlightenment, nor post-humanist pluralist postmodernism (with its anti-foundationalism) can provide the intellectual blood, sweat and tools to deal with this situation. So often, what's adopted is a post-party politics of retreat into 'matters of concern' immediately to hand. This is not to say that these matters may well not be important, it is to say that this politics is not sufficient and is often encased in the space of privilege.

On the upside, there are a few glimmers of hope of a new critical thinking that can embrace (in thought and action) what is actually critical in a futural sense. On the downside, this new thinking is arriving against a backdrop of theory taking a beating from the implosion of socialism, the instrumentalisation of knowledge in the service of economic rationalism and from a culture of ineffectual late-humanists posing as an intellectual avant-garde. Nowhere are

these strands more evident than in the economism of a depleted labour movement and in the modern university – the 'university in ruins' that has failed to withstand reconfiguration by managerialism, takeover by vocationalism and resignation to working in the rubble by 'once-were-radicals'.[1]

Is it premature to claim a philosophy of the object-thing as a glimmer of hope for an intellectual politics able to help revitalise the political? This review aims to contribute to the reader's assessment, but first we need to be clear why **object** and **thing** are being conjoined.

The object arrives via a conceptual act of objectification, be it through cognitive designation or by prefiguration and the act of making. 'Thing' is a looser term, and while things may be equated with objects they are equally situated, circumstantial and rendered as abstract. Objects flow into things, things flow into gather objects. Both come with intellectual baggage, common use in language, a problematic relation to the subject and a complex relation to design. The chance of creating a philosophical understanding of objects or things that displaces current perceptions and misconceptions is slight. Strategically what is needed is a bridging of the familiar and the unfamiliar which allows for a movement between a thinking of and an engagement with objects (material and immaterial) and things (substantive and abstract), hence the use the term **'object-thing'**. One might ask, even if this issue is of importance to theory and politics does it really have any interest for design? The answer is absolutely! This not least because design thinking and research is currently trapped within limited horizons and introspection. **Object-thing philosophy** is a potentially very significant way forward. It allows and assists a movement of thought between the general and the particular, worlds and design practice.

Leave Your Politics at the Door

Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel jointly curated an ambitious exhibition *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* at the ZKM/Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany in 2005. They also edited the accompanying publication. The themes of the exhibition and the publication significantly overlapped, however, they are not identical. In sum, the project registered a growing recognition of the under-estimated transformative force of *things* in contrast to the over-estimated agency of current political ideologies and institutionalised forms. Linked to the notion of an under-acknowledged agency of objects and an over-estimated view of the agency of humans, such thinking has the potential to radically revise perceptions of 'world making' and the nature of democracy. Through a number of exhibitions and publications, this kind of thinking has already touched the corporate world and has the prospect of breaking into popular culture as 'the politics of things'. The degree to which this actually happens is still an open

question, not least because a variety of political directional and politics are becoming evident.

Our concern here is of course with the publication, *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* which is truly a massive forest-flattening tome. It consists of around 140 essays and a dozen extracts from recent and distant dearly departed thinkers, all gathered in 1072 pages plus prelims. There are 15 themes (plus a conclusion) that weave in, out and across philosophy, political theory, aesthetics, architecture, new media, technology, information theory, religion, popular culture and more. The book is a thing: an object, a gathering, an abstraction, a reification of a phantom constituency, an evaporated moment. Some of its essays are insightful, some slight, a good deal are appropriately provoking, some are not and just a few are appalling, thus like most large collections, it adds up to being a 'curates egg'. Having said this we should take a more critical take on what is presented. Superficially, it looks like a pluralistic exercise, but it is actually a gathering together to serve neo-pragmatism and neo-liberalism.

While many contemporary writers on the political, like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, are rebuked by one contributor for suggesting a nexus between pragmatism and late capitalism, much in the book displays evidence to the contrary.[2] A good deal of what is written embraces a *laissez-faire* cultural economy and a pro 'consumer sovereignty' ideology integral to capitalist globalising (post)modernism. The book actually opens with a double page picture of the exhibition in which can be seen a typographic image on a wall saying "The Market Place too is a Parliament". This image says it all in terms of the reduction of politics to a commodity among commodities and the acceptance of 'what's in it for me' voter ontology.

Rather than try to do a whistle stop tour of the contents of the publication, which could be no more than a thin gloss, what is going to be reviewed is the overall political project that guides it.

The writing of co-author Bruno Latour has, over a number of years, made an important contribution to exposing the hybridity of the human condition. He has argued that we exist in worlds of human and non-human hybrids. He has equally recognised that the language we have available to explore and make sense of the environments in which we exist is inadequate in dealing with what he calls the 'imbroglios' around us. In contrast, the value of his past and present writing on politics is more open to question.[3] There are, I suggest, fundamental problems with the project of *Making Things Public*, but what can be affirmed is that opening a new political agenda focussing on the constant overlooking of 'the object of concern' by political theory and the major role 'things' play, is a positive contribution. In an activity that regards itself as 'experimental', and within which 'difference' is recognised as a crucial operative factor, one could assume that constructive

criticism would be welcome (even though criticism itself has been assigned to the dustbin of history by Latour).

Bruno Latour believes "we live in politically discouraging times" and that now is the moment to make "a fresh start" – which *Making Things Public* presumably aims to help prompt.

At a basic level, what thinking person could possible disagree with this under-statement? At the same time who 'we' are begs some acknowledgement. We are not 'the establishment'; neither are we the dispossessed victims of the political ineptitude that manifests itself in the social, economic and cultural horrors in which a significant percentage of the world's population lives. 'We' are in actuality a non-consensual mass of difference who do not share a common view of what is found to be "discouraging". This is not a problem until we come to the issue of a "fresh start". Two problems immediately arrive: what to do with the power bloc that already 'holds the political ground' (history suggest an other politics is only ever tolerated if it is ineffectual – as soon as it threatens actual change, conflict ensues); and, to start is one thing, but it begs a question of direction ('matters of concern' are one thing, 'the matter of direction' (the world desired to be created) is another). In so far as it is "discouraging" that 'we' are being misdirected (led toward increased unsustainability) the question of direction is paramount. Whatever local value a micro-politics of process might have, it needs a unifying direction to facilitate a pursuit of 'commonality in difference' (this observation, of course, maps onto the question of foundations and the problem of pragmatism's anti-foundationalism).

There are other fundamental political problems underscoring the project.

There was an instruction to visitors to the exhibition to 'leave your politics at the door'. While one understands this as an appeal to open-mindedness, it is at best inept. One's politics is not like a raincoat or an umbrella; it cannot be left at the door. It is ontologically, and so elementally, formative of who and what we are. We are all politically formed and framed irrespective of how, or even if, we articulate our politics – our personal is always political. To fail to recognise this is to fail to grasp the crucial difference between 'the political' (the conduct of people and the things they bring into being) and politics (the institutionalised management of the political). More than this, the request is deeply insulting to anyone who has paid a price for their politics. Political positions are not simply voluntaristically adopted, acquired by joining a political party or movement, learnt at university or via books – this well be the way the socially advantaged come to politics, but for the disadvantaged, discriminated against, oppressed and dispossessed, the political is absolutely experiential. Politicisation arrives before politics.

The politics of the anti-politics of the 'Making Things Public' is presented as experimental. Latour tells us it was inspired by the

American tradition of Pragmatism, specifically the work of Walter Lippmann and John Dewey.[4] What then is the character of this inspiration? Noortje Marres sketches this in her essay 'Issues Spark a public into being', pointing out that the philosopher, Dewey and the journalist, Lippmann concluded that the presentation of information was not a key problem of modern democracy and technological society.[5] They did not believe that high-quality information was a necessary condition for democracy, neither did the political system require 'simple problem-definitions'. They also considered that democracy has no (theoretical) place for unfamiliar, strange or 'entangled' objects of concern. In fact Dewey and Lippmann thought that complexity in domestic and international politics rather than being an obstacle to people's active participation in politics is what actually drew them in – the 'unfamiliar, strange and complex' functioned to create an 'enabling' condition for democratic politics. They postulated that effectively, in conjunctural circumstances wherein the political system failed 'to deal with the problem', contingently constituted active 'publics' arrive out of communities of concern who then act via 'suitable structures' (as the change agents). Such formations of 'political communities' are not viewed as equating with 'social communities'. Dewey idealistically (rather than pragmatically) believed that the public(s) with which he posited agency could be resourced by institutionalised mechanisms enabling their assembly. His diluted Hegelianism posits a faith in the rational state, as expressed by the failures of the state being corrected by a part-state sponsored remaking of the state. The public which acts for the Dewey-Lippmann construct is amorphous – a 'phantom' – it magically appears, acts and then goes back into invisibility.

The merit of the Dewey-Lippmann politic thesis, Marres asserts, is that it simply comes down to 'the problems that people are actually implicated in can be a democratic politics and its content.' The whole tenor and thinking of the model of politics presented and its attempted massaging into the present, is a folksy toy-town America vision. It is naive. It is an 'apple-pie and mom' version of democracy that conspires with the ideological fiction that the United States establishment promotes but fails to practice via its government or reactive publics. Imagine the reception this thesis would get by the black community of New Orleans, the inmates of an Australian Immigrant Detention Centre, the people of Sudan, Pacific Islanders watching sea levels rise or the millions of Indian farmers made homeless by a government acting on advice from an American management consultancy. Additionally, there is the issue, as theorists like Giorgio Agamben and Judith Butler unequivocally show, of the US government increasingly suspending the rule of law in the name of a 'state of exception' based on the expediency of 'national security'.[6] The 'public' is disenfranchised in such a setting, first of all not by limited information or misinformation

but by having no information, and second, by political resistance being criminalised as sedition. Other American tow-liner nations, like Britain and Australia have followed suit. Dewey and Lippmann were smart guys in their day, but their day is done.

To idealise democracy is to paralyse it. Democracy is not singular, static or self-evident – it always begs qualification. Representative parliamentary liberal democracy and the direct participatory democratic process are poles apart. Moreover, democracy, even in its pluralistic forms, be the end of the road of political development, not least because of its: (i) lack of futural vision; (ii) incapability of recognising and dealing with the directional agency of the objects emanating from hegemonic technology (which is not to posit technology as an independent entity over which humans have power, but to evoke humans as technological beings in a naturalised technological world); and (iii) the globalisation of democratic popularism and its interlocutors 'consumer sovereignty' and 'growth based economy', as foundational to the electoral process and integral to the continual expansion of the unsustainable (which is to say, that voters will not vote for the changes upon which sustainment depends). The latter problem is at the core of the politics of human futures, and the (in)adequacy of democratic politics as it stands – which is no argument for discredited modes of dictatorship.

Dominantly, western politics names a disjunctural institutionalised activity wherein professionalisation has, by intent, disarticulated it from the popular (seen, for example, in the breaking of the labour movement, the construction of the 'a-political university' and the demise of the public political intellectual). This is, however, not quite how Latour sees it: "When we usually think of politics, we think only of a very small series of attitudes that suppose a gathering of people around the question of the representation of people."[7]

What Lippman and Dewey, and, on their tail, Latour, do not recognise is the distinction between **politics** and **the political**.

The political is always more than politics; it infiltrates the structuring of social, economic and cultural power at every level. The nature of objects and their relation to the state and form of things, is encased within or against this structuring. Latour's treatment of 'things' glides between politics and the political. At the same time, his address to things as actors (or what he calls 'actants'), as formative, interconnected agents in the world – with world here being the world of things-in-being and beings-with-things – is soundly presented and instructive.[8] Yet the experiment falters the more it is influenced by the thing that inspire it – his faith in the transformative power of the representation of politics, science and art. In fact, the whole working over of the 'problem of representation' in philosophy and cultural theory of the past few decades seems to have been completely and willfully overlooked by the project. Likewise, the pragmatism of *Making Things Public* selectively suspends criticism of market capitalism.

Latour says he rejects criticism in favour of proximity (involvement) – but to what?[9] The big political issues, like the 'long war', the destruction of the world's rainforests, global warming, the horror of Sudan and now Chad, the water wars on the Keynian/Ethopian border, impending nuclear proliferation, USA setting India as a buffer against Chinese expansionsim – such 'things' are not exactly close at hand. How, we wonder, does Latour imagine it is possible to get close to these issues beyond gestural action, including putting one's body on the line? Maybe the agenda does not go beyond local micro-politics, if so what about the big issues that shape our future (or lack of)? His position actually sets-up a ridiculous either/or. The problem with criticism is not its exhaustion, but its underdevelopment and the inversion of critical distance to create positions of disengagement. Certainly the critic should, when possible, become a critical actor, but this does not imply abandoning criticism but rather giving it more edge. What really should be demanded of criticism is that it be brought into the domain of the critical that defutures.[10]

One awaits Latour's post-critical voice with interest.

One of the most interesting and problematic aspects of Latour's work is the preoccupation with 'things' made politics. This has marked his thinking for a number of years and is manifest in a position summarised at the end of his opening essay on 'dingpolitik'.[11] His concluding points add up to saying that (his) politics is a sensibility brought to the sphere of activity of the political. It's a weak position that adds up to resignation to the status quo as the space in which to insert or form political things (here inspiration shifts to the 'real-politic' opportunism of architect Rem Koolhaas and it actually makes Dewey's idea of remaking of the state look radical). Lots of banners are raised in the hope of attracting followers – but for what? Latour's 'politics' clearly has an appeal to some in the de-politicised cultures of the present, but as the 'age of affluence' of the west slowly, or not so slowly, starts to dissolve, it offers nothing to the coming actors on the emergent 'battlefield' of resources, inequity and climate on which the future will be won or lost. Latour recoils against such rhetoric. He joins with the voice of status quo that calls it negative. Facing the seemingly impossibly is not negative, it's the only possible option if one/we are not to be defeated by it. Negativity is knowing this and then retreating into the space of the possible and claiming it as positive.

So although one tries to find a way to embrace promise in the 'atmosphere of democracy' of *Making Things Public* all one finds is another bunch of academics and artists toying around with neo-pragmatism or being toyed around by it. Getting artists to leave the egos at the door (of the exhibition and subordinate themselves to a cause is no mean feat, and of course some academics do have something of import to say, and some do have an experiential political history (in contrast to an intellectual history of politics) but

why no political actors? Where is the place of the voice political struggle, the voice of proximity? One is left reflecting on Carl Schmitt's analysis of 'political romanticism' as the aestheticisation and evacuation of politics. Schmitt's voice still resonates and begs answering, especially as the 'state of emergency' that underpins the 'state of exception' becomes a normative condition – such thinking is the kind of politics that Latour *et al*. wants 'left at the door'.[12] Tracking through the landscape of choices and non-choices that are enveloped by the 'atmospheres of democracy' is no way of *dealing* (a 'no' word) with the need to 'be positive' in the face of the 'emergency' – being positive is having the courage to confront the negative and then trying to find a way to resist it.[13]

Finally, Latour's view of 'things' requires comment. The binary relation he establishes between objects and things is contestable. Not withstanding the way objects are so often seen as independent entities, they exist relationally and are animated in use. Once they are seen as such they become indistinguishable from things. Latour's view centres on a recovery of a Nordic and Saxon history and etymology (as well as taking up and partly throwing out Heidegger's insights on the term). He moves through understandings of things as gathering and 'matters of concern' and then takes this thinking to how 'science, technology, commerce, industry and popular culture' can be thought and engaged. In so doing, his ambition is to embrace, recover and invent new 'assemblies' which bridge the material and the immaterial, the animate and the inanimate. His selective pluralism throws a profusion of ideas into the air – some fall on fertile ground, some land awkwardly and others just float away.

Fanciful 'parliaments' (like that of fashion) and technologies of market 'choice' (that organise spaces of 'consumption', what appears in them, how products are selected and then how they are delivered) – such ideas as presented in *Making Things Public* carry with them an unwillingness to confront the politics of imposition that now challenges democracy and the human crisis of finitude (named here as 'defuturing').[14]

Politics without People

One of the thinkers Latour includes in *Making Things Public* is Graham Harman, who has written two books, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002) and *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (2005).

While *Guerrilla Metaphysics* is the more recent of the two, and thus conventionally expected to be the object of focus, it is not possible to review it in isolation from *Tool-Being*, of which it is very much a further development.

Tool-Being, which consists of three chapters, is set up with a kind of Nietzschean arrogance. Chapter One outlines Harman's general understanding of tool-being, in which Heidegger arrives

as a source of inspiration, appropriation and then disdain. Chapter Two presents his views on what he regards as the most prominent secondary literature on Heidegger, while Chapter Three is where Harman's 'object-oriented philosophy' is fully elaborated. Here he moves beyond Heidegger, especially drawing on Alfred North Whitehead and Emmanuel Levinas, to claim his own turf.

Harman's argument turns on his reduction of Heidegger's entire project to one insight – the distinction between *presence-at-hand* and *readiness-to-hand* (renamed by Harmen as 'tool-being'). The problem is not whether this claim is true or false, which Heideggerian scholars can argue about, but rather that it is a grossly reductive understanding of the very notion of reading philosophy. As Heidegger commented early in his career, and echoed many times later: "the point is not to gain some knowledge about philosophy but to be able to philosophise". In this respect, he understood "philosophy as ontological".[15] Obviously, philosophising draws on the work of philosophers, but what is philosophised and how is neither in the control of the philosopher or the text. The history of the take-up of Heidegger indicates myriad ways in which his thought sparked the thinking of others. Harman naturally knows this, but disingenuously negates it in his text. It as if he were saying, "I possess the only true reading of Heidegger and my reading invalidates all others." Cute remarks about Heidegger are of course fashionable among the neo-prags, in fact (for effect) Richard Rorty goes so far as to call Heidegger a "self-infatuated blowhard" and "a perfect example of an idiot" and, best of all, a person "whom you would never want to represent you in parliament" (Martin Heidegger MP, there's a storyline to win a Booker prize if ever there was one!).[16]

When not point scoring against those philosophers he views with disdain, Harman slides and glides between objects and things as concrete and abstract. Finding a way through Harman's texts is no easy task. His style is to take a fixated idea for a long meandering walk in order to display how much cultural philosophical capital he has acquired and to show-off his creative writing skills. He deliberately aims to provoke the reader – thus one can be both challenged and irritated. For all this, Harman does have something to say on objects taking on and having a life of their own, which he does by taking up and dramatically extending Martin Heidegger's notion of equipmentality. The presence of the substance of a thing (its presence-to-hand) and its availability to use *as* what it is known to do (its readiness-to-hand) is constituted as a problem in Heideggerian philosophy with two aspects – disclosure and proximity.

One can concur with Harman when critiquing Heidegger's distinction between 'readiness-to-hand' and 'presence-at-hand', and their mapping onto function, form and substance. They are indivisible in the realm of equipmentality.[17] The hammer (that most written-about object in the Heideggerian oeuvre), cannot exist

independently in form and use from the material from which it was made. Obviously, equipment is not encountered in the abstract, but differentially encountered in the world in its material form. More than this, our disposition towards objects will obviously vary – we are more, or less, interested in tools, clothes, furniture and so on. Irrespective, all objects act as perspectival points of entry into the relationality of the equipmental sphere. Objects are no more able to anchor and reveal 'true' meaning than words or images.

Harman presents an uneven argument on the significance of equipment; and while his analysis does illuminate the significance of 'that dark secluded power' of objects it also has limited vision.[18] His generalisations leave much free-floating and he has not recognised objects prefigured or ahead of themselves – design. Specifically, those manufactured objects (material and immaterial) and equipment (as it is generally understood as functionally) that now overwhelmingly populate the environments of (our) habitation are brought into being by the 'design', as such they become ontologically present as means of making or unmaking – this is the essence of their power. Yet it evades us. We do not see what objects do: that which moves and (per)forms beyond visibility is assumed as stasis, however, everything is *en route* to its destiny no matter how long it takes to reach it. Things 'exist' in disjunctural time.

Harman acknowledges and extends the critical opening made by Heidegger on the unavailability of reality as 'present-to-hand'. He does this by expanding upon equipment's functioning by making everything agency (all entities are deemed equipment and thereby not reducible to their 'presentable form').[19] He goes as far as to say that all beings fall "under the heading of equipment, and that every entity is a tool".[20] In his objectification, Harman draws an absolute distinction between subjects and objects that is totally contradicted by the 'ontological designing of things' and by equipmental objects bringing humans (the cultural entity) into being. As the French palaeontologist André Leroi-Gourhan showed over half a century ago, the tool maker was made by *the making and the made*, and thereafter the made world (in every respect and its remaking) was constituted – thus the event(s) that gave rise to the human and to technology were actually indivisible.[21]

Harman never reaches a recognition of the function of 'design' (in all of its characterisations) as either: (i) an articulation between the presence-at-hand (substance) and the ready-to-hand (artifice/ use), or (ii) as directive of the invisibility of things (i.e., infrastructure) and the life-form of things. The first point means he overlooks the idea, made visible as 'the might be' that prefigures something manufactured coming to presence, and so becoming a specific and operative object-thing. Object-things do not merely function as technically operative but according to how design has directed them to have a particular form and function(ality). The second

point is that the life of object-things created by artifice is not a life independent of human action. They are not independently created beings. Rather such things are invested with a life by design – of course this does not imply they always conform to what has been inscribed. However, holding their operative and semiotic function in place is relentlessly pursued by design practice. As for infrastructure, in many cases it is specifically designed to be invisible – this as much for aesthetic and politico-environmental reasons as for as operational ones.

Design ruptures the binary divisions between subject/object; human/things; and anthropocentrism/anthropomorphism (a condition Harman warns of but constantly falls into). Design does this insofar as while emanating from mind, it constitutes things in the world (i.e. tools) that themselves have been designed and are drawn-on (used/redesigned) in designing. Ontologically, design is an environing in which designing takes place. The most overt example of this is the domain of the televisual (the sum of all visual electronic media). There is now no designing subject anywhere within the reach of the televisual (which is globally almost everywhere) who designs without imaginaries authored by it. Gregory Bateson's notion of mind as an ecology (an external condition of which the televisual has become a major element) can be drawn on here – 'we' dwell in the televisual ecology '*as* beings designed' and '*as* designing beings', and as such posit our selves in object-things while object-things posit themselves in us (what 'as' denotes here is a relational complexity rather than an impoverished reduction).[22] Taking this relational schema into account, Harman's project of rejecting a human centred metaphysics in favour of a metaphysics of objects (a neo-realism) can be seen as a step sideways rather than forward.

Even within the terms of his project, in overlooking design Harman manifests a restricted understanding of objects and perpetuates the failure of philosophy to embrace the prefigurative 'nature' of human being. This is specifically evident in his insufficient examination of the multi-vectoral quality of object-things (the 'thinging of things'), when he discussing the example of a bridge.[23] To take Harman's exact phrase: a bridge's reality is not found "… in its amalgam of asphalt and cable, but in the geographic fact of "traversable gorge"". In actuality one cannot divide a bridge's bridging function as identified from its wider 'in-order-to' functionality. The bridge has to have all the elements of its structure appropriately designed, manufactured and assembled so they perform together in an environment of use and in time. A bridge just does not simply sit there in its connectingness, unchanging, waiting to be crossed – it moves. It expands and contracts with heat and cold and moves with the wind, likewise it carries and so bears weight as it is traversed. Its users are not just human, animals also use bridges. In connecting particular environments, bridges become a means by

which the movement of pests, seeds and other biological matter is facilitated (often with our, and our vehicles', assistance). The 'world *it* generates' is not just the bridge in place but a 'world of bridges': it exists from and within a language of bridges that allows a 'design conversation' to take place. In a sense, every bridge that was, exists in every bridge that is.

Although Harman recognises that equipment is global, it exists in a far more complex environment of function and reference than he explores.[24] So while he indicates a progressive phenomenological pathway, this requires considerably more exploration to support an 'object oriented philosophy', which includes recognising the dialectical nature of the production of things. Critically, whatever artifice creates is at the price of whatever it destroys. The example of the bridge is a case in point. On the one hand all of its materials arrive via extraction and manufacture. How this is done, by what means and how often sways the question of ends justifying means one way or another (the fact that to build a bridge in many countries now requires some kind of environmental impact statement is a crude registration of this fact).

Harman statement that all beings fall "under the heading of equipment. Every entity is a tool" is an overstatement that reduces difference to the same.[25] For Harman this world of 'tool-being' is not able to be unveiled by philosophy "by the illegitimate use of the as-structure" rather it constitutes a world to be "reverse engineered".[26] Even if this were the project, ironically, philosophy just does not have the tools. But more than this, the objective of reverse engineering is the 'cracking of the codes' for the making of the same! Commercially, it's a form of appropriation, theft and a point at which capitalism and crime fuse.

One now briefly turns to Harman's latest book – *Guerrilla Metaphysics* – with interest. Again, it is in a division of three (this time parts rather than chapters – of which there are twelve). Here, tool-being lives on in a heady eclectic mix of philosophy and poetics, all knitted together with an even more ambitious literary flurry.

Has the precocious intellect matured? Has he managed to bring philosophy (specifically a reconfigured phenomenology) to the objects of the world/the world of objects in a way that really does enable an understanding of the extent of the complexity of their being-active, isolation or interaction? Let's take some of Harman's own words to find answers:

> In this book I embrace a model of the world in which objects are always absent, concealed from human view but also from each other. An object or tool-being exceeds any possible access to it, and the intentional object of perception (which may not even be real) also evades contact with us.

Well, it seems that having stepped through the black hole and conquered anti-matter, Harman has found a place to speak on behalf of objects (rather than on them). He has chosen a ficto-philosophy of absolute separation rather than discovering the articulated relation of the animate and the inanimate, subjects and objects, being and beings that exposes the limitation of the categories, language and mind. He is pretending not to be anthropocentric, yet one knows he cannot transfer his book-bound model to his being-in-the-world *in order to structure* the instrumentally employed. Realism fails him. Harman states his approach provides the 'strange material' from which 'object-oriented philosophy *must* be built' [my emphasis]. It does not. He falls between a philosophical construction of object as Idea and the actuality of an empirical entity. And his 'carpentry of things' is attempted to be made with a tool-kit consisting of a very limited number actual tools and a set of confusing instructions. For all the desire for another language, Harman is steeped in a 'fundamental bookishness' that his inflated notion of 'guerrilla metaphysics' aspires to deflate.

A philosophy of objects is equally a philosophy of worlding (world formation and transformation). Often objects *are not* discrete, they interconnect, act systemically and constitute ecologies. What is at stake in such a project is not philosophy but the relation between 'what is', creation, destruction and human agency expressible as 'ethical materialism'. Trying to understand what is stake here throws us back to the very birth of western philosophy and its claimed first utterance – Anaximander's Saying,

But that from which things have their arising also gives rise to their passing away according to necessity; they give justice and pay penalty to each other for the injustice according to the ordinance of time.[27]

A philosophical exploration and understanding of design and the 'arising' and 'passing away' of things has an important part to play in gaining a relational understanding of objects and in advancing an ethical materialism.

The human-object relation has made a world (the naturalised artificial) in which intentionality is neither simply vested in perception and language, nor able to be ascribed to nature, but rather is a quality of object-things themselves. This is evidenced in our own hybridity as technological beings. The problem that really should galvanise us is that we bring objects into being as instrumental-aesthetic entities without understanding what has been created and what it will do for good or ill. The binary, the rupture, that Harman celebrates is *de facto* an abandonment of responsibility – undoubtedly a problem-laden and dated notion, but one upon which our very future is suspended. Responsibility is indivisible

from the 'things' that decide the futural inter-relations between human beings, and between humans and objects.

Design Enters Stage Left, Llushes, Exits Stage Right

In contrast to Harman, Peter-Paul Verbeek in *What Things Do* seeks to bring design and equipmentality together by attempting to use the notion of mediation to articulate world, technology and prefiguration. The book opens with a focus on technology, self and things, moves in Part Two to things as a basis for philosophical inquiry and ends with bringing philosophy to artefacts and design. This honest and unpretentious work is welcomed, and looked full of promise. However, sad to say, that a good deal of what is presented reductively evacuates technology, and never arrives at an understanding of the essence or agency of design.

A significant part of Verbeek's problem rests with his self-imposed academic encasement within the sub-discipline of the philosophy of technology (be it with the invited presence of Bruno Latour into his thinking). This means he overlooks a whole raft of relevant critical thought, which itself illustrates the limitations of his territorialism. Absences one can cite include Bernard Stiegler's very substantial exploration of the technical object, how technology has been understood and its relation to the human, or Michael Heim's fascinating philosophical investigation of word processing.[28] Equally, there are the varied forms of engagement with televisual technology by William McNeill, Samuel Weber, Richard Dienst, myself and others. In relation to design, technology and the artefact, Vilém Flusser is a notable absence, as is my own recasting of design history and Jean Baudrillard's writing on design, signs and objects.[29] Moreover, the lack of even the most basic understanding of the history of art, architecture and design, evident in comments on modernism, modernity and the history of design itself are galling, it is suggested, for even the most causal reader in these areas.

One could perhaps be more forgiving of the limitations cited if Verbeek had delivered the kind of theoretical exposition that his project of 'philosophical reflection' promised. Unfortunately, the book is disappointing on this front also.

He works with an edifice of binary relations without any critical view of the problems associated this thinking. The subject and the object are held in place by his elaboration of the role of technology and artefacts as mediation. For instance, artefacts, as agents of perceptual and interpretative transformation, do a great deal more than help "shape to [sic] the way in which human beings encounter reality".[30] In actuality, how artefacts are seen and understood directly influences the way in which they are used and treated and thus act on 'reality' as a condition of continual change.

Verbeek's reading of Heidegger is also weak.

The crucial contribution that Heidegger makes to our understanding of modern technology is that *he exposes its*

essence as Gestell. Now, as Albert Borgmann has pointed out, how this term has been misunderstood and mistranslated is 'unfortunate'. Citing Joan Stambaugh, Carl Mitcham and Robert Mackey, he suggests that 'framework' (a common 'homely word') is more apt than the usually employed term 'enframing'.[31] Mitcham later elaborates the term further as 'the technological attitude towards the world".[32] Although this exposition was in one of the works Verbeek cited he let the observation slip by unnoticed. The actual observations on *Gestell* made by Borgmann invited consideration. They actually open the way to making crucial connections that alters how one understands both what Heidegger is saying about technology and the relation between it and design.

What taking the essence of technology as 'framework' reveals is the framing, the containment, of what is seen.[33] Framing is a designing of what is to be seen, it prefigures perception by what is included and excluded. Contrary to Verbeeek's view, technology does not simply mediate "the relations between human beings and their world", rather it unambiguously infuses and transforms both for the better and frequently for the worse.

Heidegger's transcendental phenomenology, which Verbeek claims to go beyond, is not a method that simply interprets the world via the reflective mechanism of a modified Husserlian 'phenomenological reduction'. Rather it shows the world that is revealed to us is already interpreted, not by a conscious subject but by the technological. This is to say that we are now not able to see the world independently from its technological framing – we have been inducted into the technological, in this sense, we are technologically inscripted beings (which means we are not in a position to mediate in the way he suggests). To pose the problem (as Verbeek does) of a gap between Heidegger's thinking and the ability to interrogate specific technologies is to miss the point of the perspective he established. No technology is ever specific; it always folds back into the technological. Moreover, no technological thing is ever discrete: it is always situated in a non-natural relation to 'nature'. Word processing, for example, exists within the ecology of the infrastructure that sustains it. That this infrastructure is mostly unseen and un-thought means that what the technology sustains (the users use of it) rests unthought, upon an unsustainable foundation (be it the degree of environmental impacts of energy, plastics, microchip/micro-electronics, ferrous and non-ferrous metals or packaging industries). The thing is always a connecting and gathering of other things in motion – every computer arrives from somewhere and remains *en route* to its final destination.

Just as 'we' cannot now 'not be technological', neither can we not be cultural. Our world, including the objects we engage, brings our historicity into our beings – in this respect objects-things are always articulated to subjects and ontological-designing agents

(again, making the whole question of mediation far more complex). We have to make sense of this situation in a grounded way.

Consider, for instance, the transition from the rise of 'human centred technologies' to the emergence of those whereby humans are centred to act on technological instructions (this is no Frankenstein fiction – there are now many thousands of factories in which human workers act, as 'baby sitters' of machines acting on their instructions).[34] Likewise, a considerable amount of research is now being directed toward the creation of technologies (especially IT) with embedded emotions. There are thus 'new technologies' where techno-centrism and anthropocentrism meet. In this situation, is there any other choice but to start to inscribe 'taking responsibility' into 'care-things'?

Sadly, these issues are not present for Verbeek, who as we have seen, calls upon the subject un-problematically, reifies the world and places technology between the two as mediation. While such instrumentalist thinking has a past and present, it has no future.

Notes

1. See the still pertinent analysis of Bill Readings *The University in Ruins* Harvard University Press: Cambridge (Mass), 1997.
2. Mara Mills 'Dewey's 'Transactionalism' *Making Thing Public* p. 294.
3. See Tony Fry 'The Cultural Politics of the Politics of Nature' *Design Philosophy Papers* No 1, 2004.
4. María J. Prieto and Elise S. Youn 'Interview with Bruno Latour: Decoding the Collective Experiment' (agglutinations@yahoo.com) July 5, 2004.
5. Noortje Marres 'Issues Spark a public into being' *Making Thing Public* pp. 208–17.
6. See especially Giorgio Agamben *State of Exception* (trans Kevin Attell) Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.
7. Ibid.
8. Bruno Latour 'Where are the Missing Masses: Sociology of Few Mundane Artefacts' in W. Bijker and J. Law (eds) Shaping Technology/Shaping Society Cambridge (Mass): MIT Press, 1992.
9. María J. Prieto and Elise S. Youn 'Interview with Bruno Latour'.
10. "My argument is that critique as a repertoire is over. It has run out of steam entirely, and now the whole question is, "how can we be critical not by distance but by proximity?" María J. Prieto and Elise S. Youn 'Interview with Bruno Latour'.
11. Bruno Latour 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik' in Latour and Weibel (eds) *Making Things Public* 2005.
12. Carl Schmitt *Political Romanticism* (trans Guy Oakes) Cambridge (Mass): MIT Press, 1986. This work was originally published in German in 1919. In some respects, the critique

is more in tune with the present than the moment when it was written. On the issue of the state of emergency in contemporary politics, see Giorgio Agamben *State of Exception* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, and the way Schmitt's thinking is used as a foil to think the present.

13. In reading Latour's essay, in the *Making Things Public* catalogue, one recalls quite another tradition of thinking things. The origins of things accounted for in the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E – 220 C.E) was based on an 'acosmotic' genealogical narrative telling of the emergence of the 'ten thousand things' as described by David Hall and Roger Ames in *Anticipating China* Albany, New York: Suny Press, 1995: pp. 11, 12, 140, 141. This account "does not depend upon the belief that the totality of things constitutes a single-ordered world. It does not suppose a "unity of Being behind beings, a One behind the Many." Thus, 'ten thousand things' is simply seen as "an *ad hoc* summing up of beings and events. Correlations among these "ten thousand things" are non-foundational." Distinctions are thus the result of a situated particularity, thus "… instead of rationalizing alternative cultures by appealing to ethnocentric notions of "universal reason" or "objective principles," we engage them as artefacts, it is the profound contrast that emerges between their respective histories, ethnographies, biographies, and genealogies that requires explanation."

14. Bruno Latour, 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik' in *Making Things Public* pp. 14–41.

15. Martin Heidegger *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (trans Albert Hofstadter from the first German edition of 1927) Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988, pp. 2, 11.

16. Richard Rorty 'Heidegger and the Atomic Bomb' in *Making Things Public* p. 275.

17. Harman, pp. 219–20.

18. Harman *Tool-Being* p. 120.

19. Ibid p. 25.

20. Harman *Tool-Being* p. 68.

21. See Stiegler *Technics and Time 1* for an account of Leroi-Gourhan's work.

22. Gregory Bateson *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* London: Paladin, 1973.

23. Harman p. 21.

24. Ibid p. 35–44.

25. Harman *Tool-Being* p. 68.

26. These remarks come from Harman's concluding comments in *Tool-Being* p. 296.

27. This is Heidegger's translation from his essay 'Anaximander's Saying' in the translation of his *Holzwege* (*Off The Beaten Track* (trans Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 248.

28. Michael Heim *Electronic Language* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.

29. Bernard Stiegler Technics and Time 1 (trans Richard Beardsworth and George Collins) Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998; Michael Heim Electronic Language New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987; William McNeill The Glance of the Eye Albany: SUNY University Press, 1999; Samuel Weber Mass Mediauras, Sydney: Power Publications, 1996; Richard Dienst Still Life in Real Time Duke University Press: Durham (NC), 1994; Tony Fry (ed) RUATV: Heidegger and the Televisual Sydney: Power Publications, 1993; Vilém Flusser The Shape of Things London: Reaktion, 1999; Tony Fry A New Design Philosophy Sydney: UNSW Press; Jean Baudrillard 'Design and the environment' in For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (trans Charles Levin) St Louis: Telos Press, 1981; Jean Baudrillard Le système des objets Paris: Denoel-Gonthier, 1968.

30. Verbeek *What Things Do* p. 208.

31. Albert Borgmann with Carl Mitcham 'The Question of Heidegger and Technology' *Philosophy Today* Vol XXXI N0 2/4, 1987, p. 109. The term *Bestand* is also addressed in this essay – rather than being translated as 'standing reserve' it is recast as 'resources', which one could further qualify as natural, made and human. This note brings Verbeek's use of the term 'raw materials' into question.

32. Carl Mitcham *Thinking Through Technology* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 53.

33. The complexity of the frame, via the *parergon*, was initially explored by Kant in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* and was revisited at length by Jacques Derrida in *The Truth in Painting* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

34. The history of the rise of this technology was registered several decades ago by David Noble *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.