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THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THINGS

feeling around for object-disoriented politics

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After bath by Zuzana Ridzonova.

simon bayly

**THERE'S SOMETHING
ABOUT THINGS**
*feeling around for object-
disoriented politics*

the protagonist of political
philosophy

For much of its recent history, political philosophy and political practice have concerned themselves with the formation of a collective political subject, a “we” which might prove to be a force of world-historical transformation, a subject that has gone by many familiar names: the nation, the empire, The West, the Aryan race, the commonwealth, the *demos*, the masses, the proletariat, the people, the public, the multitude, the crowd, the party, the part who have no part,

the subaltern, the 99 per cent, humanity, Gaia. The formation of the subject “we” that is politics expands and contracts in asymmetrical cycles. Versions of “us” are remade in each iteration of this cycle through processes of inclusion and exclusion, increases in contraction, specificity and intensity offset by shifts towards expansion, universality and inclusivity. In different historical times and places, each of these entities is endowed as the agent of politics “proper,” as the embodiment of a certain regime of truth and of power.

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there's something about things

Against these traditions, the more recent emergence of an object-oriented politics refuses to prioritize any particular subject or agent of political sovereignty, in favour of processes of agonism and antagonism in which a public forms around “objects” called issues. An issue is an object in which matters of fact are transformed into matters of concern, mediated by both human and non-human actants. There is no pre-constituted political subject which subsequently busies itself with this or that ideology, programme or policy: there are only object-issues around which publics and counter-publics form themselves in chains or networks with other non-human entities. This idea has its origins in early twentieth-century American pragmatism, taken up in the widely influential work of Bruno Latour, deploying an argument subsequently underpinned by the work of Noortje Marres on the pragmatists’ articulation of public as a kind of fiction which must be summoned into actuality through its coagulation around each and every issue. Through the multiplication of issues, an object-oriented politics exists in perpetual motion, going from one thing to another. In Latour’s recent formulation, the elusiveness of this political “what” is fundamental:

It is thus above all because politics is always object-oriented – to borrow a term from information science – that it always seems to elude us. As though the weight of each issue obliged a public to gather around it – with a different geometry and different procedures on every occasion. Moreover, the very etymology of this ancient word – *chose*, *cause*, *res*, or thing – signals in all the languages of Europe the weight of issues that must always be paid for with meetings. It is because we disagree that we are obliged to meet – we are held to that obligation and thus assembled. The political institution has to take into account the cosmology and the physics through which things – the former matters of fact that have become matters of concern – oblige the political to curve around it. (*Inquiry* 337)

If an object-oriented ontology insists that the object is the true protagonist of philosophy, is

there a true protagonist of an object-oriented politics – and are these protagonists in any way related? In other words, what is the shape of the institution that Latour and others suggest is formed by really taking things into account? The way in which actor-network theory has massively extended what assembles and reassembles both the social and the political to include all manner of living, inanimate, natural, unnatural, artificial, fictional and non-existent entities (the “cosmology” Latour invokes above) is well established in the variety of realisms, materialisms, immaterialisms and object-oriented ontologies that have emerged over the last decade or so. Considered as a homeopathic response to a surfeit of human-made objects and interventions that are now suffocating the planet (the diagnosis of the so-called Anthropocene), the political form of the Latourian remedy might be called “assemblism,” an abiding commitment to public scenes of debate, contestation and decision among interested parties. But whereas this scene was once the sole preserve of humans, within dedicated spaces, such as parliaments, legislatures or council chambers, for assemblism the contested concept of who or what counts as human is finally opened up and exposed to the great outdoors, to a democracy of objects, a thing-politics. These kinds of assembly are detached from any particular physical embodiment in the antique world of human-only “meatspace” and are no longer limited to the sphere of mere discourse. Politics now includes collapsing ice sheets and melting glaciers; powerful images, opaque spreadsheets and complex scientific papers representing those collapsings and meltings; the physical instruments used to collect them, the non-human animals that interfere with those instruments, the uniforms worn by the humans that interfere with those animals and interpret the data that their compromised instruments produce, as well as many philosophical varieties of table, cup and unicorn. All these things get in on the act of assembly that now constitutes the political, they all form part of the issue around which a public gathers and which can gather anywhere – or not at all.

Mentioning in passing the etymology of *thing* in the quotation above, Latour returns to an archaic association between thing and object that is not typically a matter of concern for most (but not all) object-oriented ontologies today. This is the association that occurs in many European languages between the use of *thing* to designate, on the one hand, a discreet physical entity also called an object and, on the other, a scene of political gathering, debate, dispute, trial, justice and decision-making: space and time given over to various forms of assembly in public. Many of these words are traced back to Germanic roots in terms such as *Ding* and *þing* and are still heard, for example, in the name of the Icelandic parliament, the *Alþingi*. Latour's passing evocation of the prior meaning of thing repeats a familiar rhetorical gesture from a specifically European philosophical thinking about *thing* as distinct from *object*. This division can be found in Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Lacan and elsewhere, taking, for example, a foundational role in Tristan Garcia's recent *Form and Object*, subtitled *A Treatise on Things*.¹ But what also immediately resonates for my discussion here is Latour's notion that "the weight of issues must always be paid for with meetings," that is – to use the evocative Garcian idiom – for the chance for issues to matter, for things to be made public, there is a price to pay and that price is: meeting. Meeting is the price to pay for the chance of politics. For better and for worse, it is the banality of this statement which this essay seeks to open up – a banality beautifully illustrated by the weekly news update email that I have paused to read after writing the previous sentence. It comes from a work colleague, who has recently stepped up temporarily into a managerial role, who signs off her first message to the departmental "we" with the following: "I think we have a week with no team meetings – enjoy!" If a better world is possible – however that might be politically envisaged – then it seems unlikely that its sheer imposition will be acceptable or even feasible. That world will not have been coded, compiled and then executed into existence via some monumental system reboot. Neither will it emerge organically as the

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spontaneous collective will of a heterogenous multitude. It will have had to be proposed, re-proposed, put on the agenda, discussed, re-formulated, debated, minuted and agreed – analogue style. There will have to be many, many meetings, which will apparently bring little joy. But before the meeting, back to the thing itself.

the thing, again

In attempting to distinguish a thing from an object, a veil of uncertainty draws over the thing. The object is identifiable, even as something immaterial or conceptual, even as the core of its in-itself is permanently withdrawn, its status as a real object withheld behind its sensual other, its noumena behind its phenomena. But something slightly mystical emanates from the aura of the thing.

A thing, before it is anything else, is an *I-don't-know-what*, something that appears but which I am unable to recognize or subsume into a proper place in the categories of more or less familiar objects. Something becomes a thing when it falls out of its "natural" or everyday place within the order of a world – like the mysterious piece of metal one finds on the floor in the event of a machine malfunction, the unexplained growth that appears on the skin of an animal, the infamous broken hammer of a Heideggerian ontology. Or when a void or absence occurs in a world of presence and solidity, as with the sudden opening up of a sinkhole beneath the house or suburban side road. There seems to be an asymmetry of knowledge between that which is a thing and that which a thing is. So that which a thing is, is in some way, at least at first, indiscernible. I discern the dim presence of a thing, but I do not know that which it is – or, at least, not quite yet, not for the time being. For example, when I realize that the peculiar-looking thing lying amongst the leaves in the woods is in fact an unusually shaped fallen bough or the sea anemone realizes that my fingertip is not food. The thing is always threatening to show itself, to appear disconcertingly from out of the flat plane where everything is menacingly equal and boring.

there's something about things

Described in this way, the thing, ostensibly stripped of all determinations and so capable of being anything at all, nevertheless comes pre-loaded with an aesthetics. To say, as object-oriented ontologists like to do, that a thing is essentially alone but too close for comfort or withheld yet intimate or emerges ominously from the plane of no-matter-what is to give the thing an emotional valency and a set of aesthetic qualities entirely separate from the manifestation of any particular thing. It seems inadequate to state that describing the thing in this way is “merely” metaphorical, a trivial by-product of the fact that philosophy is forged out of human thought and language. To be alone or withdrawn or withheld is altogether different than being, say, distinct or separate or individuated. The function of the familiar object-oriented litany is to prove that lonely objects can also be thrillingly together, any objects, the more dissimilar the better: sunshine, Fruit Loops, a bat's ear, the lichen on Heidegger's hut, a cheese grater, the dust orbiting the star Sirius, the word Sirius, the concept of luck, the possible inexistence of each of these things. The lonely thing invites sympathy, inviting a reaching out that would draw it near. At the same time, the request is to leave it alone, to protect it from the subtle hopelessness that necessarily accompanies having to force a thing to participate in a world saturated with so many other things. Writing of the ontological primacy of the thing in his philosophy, how it refuses to be delimited to particular determinations, Garcia finds himself obliged to enigmatically suggest that “there is something contaminating in the thing” (38). Although he does not mean it this way, perhaps what is contaminating in the thing, like the plastic bag recently found resting on the deepest part of the ocean floor, is that the thing now comes always already contaminated by human presence, human sensibility, human feeling.

Scanning the object-oriented philosophical universe, what other types of emotions, feelings or psychologically loaded characteristics, beside loneliness, are associated with the thing *qua* thing? Horror, anxiety, excitement, sexiness,

awe, menace, darkness, love.² These feelings share a quality of an indeterminate intensity, a viral too-muchness. They generate a paradoxical sense of the thing as weird yet withdrawn, lonely yet awesome, deserving of love yet emanating a certain danger, enjoying solitude yet possessed of an appetite that constantly propels it outwards in search of something.

These qualities do not adhere to the object. The object *qua* object, before being any particular object, tends to sit there, inspiring... not much, mostly indifference. While a specific table, cypress tree or polystyrene cup can prove philosophically inspirational, the object *qua* object seems to lack the intrinsic allure of thing *qua* thing. Object-oriented ontologies successfully expend much effort in imbuing objects with strong doses of liveliness, whereas the thing appears already animated by its own internal energies. Objects can be destroyed without loss, replaced without much more than a strictly financial cost. One does not really care for or mourn the absence of an object, only of a thing. After all, it is said these things are my things or your things or the things of the earth, not my objects, your objects or the earth's objects.

Yet to insist on an ontological difference between thing and object makes demands on the nuances of specific languages, meanings and significances as culturally inflected factors. This is exactly what an object-oriented ontology would prefer to de-emphasize, since either all things are equally things outside of language, or nothing is. The whole point of thing-politics and of becoming object-oriented was precisely not to sideline things and objects in their non-human being, nor to prioritize some things over some objects. But here “we” go again, talking about things and objects that can be lonely, weird, strange or withheld whilst simultaneously inviting an intoxicating intimacy.

This brief excursion into the emotional landscape of the thing seems to have approached it more closely whilst at the same time surrounding it with a particular brand of “humanness” in a claustrophobic manner. The argument seems preoccupied with the exclusive flavour

of human beings encountering each other in scenes of unmediated contact and withdrawal. Earlier, I noted that this contradiction is embedded within the etymology of the word *thing*. In its familiar contemporary usage, *thing* usually refers to strictly non-human entities but once upon a time signified a human gathering to debate and adjudicate over differences, i.e., to “do” politics. However, if things are to be approached in their more ordinary usage, then it would seem necessary to give up this etymological archaism, even as an argument might borrow from its free association with the free associations of humans gathered to do politics. In fact, to do so seems more in line with a purported democracy of objects, since the thing/object distinction seems to introduce an unwarranted difference, even if the same entity might, under different conditions, fall under either a thingly or an objective existence. When it comes to the thing as non-human object, it is as if what is most contaminating in the thing is precisely a political humanism that was forged within a specifically European philosophical tradition. It is the recalcitrant presence of this tradition of politics at the heart of the thing that complicates a politics that seeks to include other-than-human things.

Heidegger faces this same problem in articulating the essence of his thing:

Neither the general, long outworn meaning of the term “thing,” as used in philosophy, nor the Old High German meaning of the word thing, however, are of the least help to us in our pressing need to discover and give adequate thought to the essential source of what we are now saying about the nature of the jug. However, one semantic factor in the old usage of the word thing, namely “gathering,” does speak to the nature of the jug as we earlier had it in mind. (“The Thing” 172)

From then on in his essay, we will hear no more about this old usage. It is the jug that gathers, capturing nearness and farness, no humans are required. Heidegger’s jug seems to have made itself. It has no handle, contains nothing

and is used by no-one. “The thing things,” all by itself and “in thinging, it stays earth and sky, divinities and mortals” (172). Like a *détourned* surrealist art object, Heidegger’s humble jug has been decommissioned from its mortal purpose as a vessel for human sustenance and elevated to a role as a divine object of aesthetic contemplation.

Remo Bodei introduces a philosophy invested in the life of things and the love of things with an explicit bracketing of its human factor:

The meaning of “thing” is broader than that of “object” because it also includes people or ideals and, more generally, everything that interests us and is close to our heart (or that can be discussed in public because it touches on the common good, from which, paradoxically, the good of the individual also depends). Keeping people necessarily in the background, I have chosen here to speak only about “material” things that are designed, constructed, or invented by human beings using the raw materials provided by nature according to specific cultural models, techniques, and traditions. Privileging material objects over human subjects also serves to show the subject itself overturned, in its most hidden and least-frequented aspect. (18–19)

In other words: yes, the meaning of thing includes people, public debate, the common good – but if we are to speak about material things, people must be kept in the background and overturned in their intimate subjectivity.

Jacques Lacan faces this same problem in articulating his conception of *das Ding*, the psychoanalytic thing that overturns human subjectivity from the outset:

We have only one word in French, the word “la chose” (thing), which derives from the Latin word “causa.” Its etymological connection to the law suggests to us something that presents itself as the wrapping and designation of the concrete. There is no doubt that in German, too, “thing” in its original sense concerns the notion of a proceeding, deliberation, or legal debate. *Das Ding* may imply not so much a legal proceeding

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itself as the assembly which makes it possible, the *Volksversammlung*.

Don't imagine that this use of etymology, these insights, these etymological soundings, are what I prefer to guide myself by – although Freud does remind us all the time that in order to follow the track of the accumulated experience of tradition, of past generations, linguistic inquiry is the surest vehicle of the transmission of a development which marks psychic reality. Current practice, taking note of the use of the signifier in its synchrony, is infinitely more precious to us. (43–44)

Aware of Lacan's prior thinking, Roberto Esposito's own revisiting of the etymology of *thing* also evokes the abandonment of its social dimension. For him, there is a nihilistic aspect to all the various inflections of the word, in which the thing is both object and subject of an arbitrary judgement. The assembly judges the thing (*res*) as legal case, decrees this or that fate for it. Yet "even this 'social' significance, so to speak, *at a certain point fades away to be replaced by another*, more neutral one that refers to an entity that is produced or represented" (Esposito 58–59; italics added).

What is striking in these passages (and there are others by different authors in more or less the same vein) is the similar way in which the plural meanings of thing must be invoked and then disavowed in the same gesture, even as the game of argument by etymology itself is both played and abandoned. The thing-as-human-assembly is a useful anachronism for its ostensibly democratic credentials, but it must be cast aside if real progress is to be made in thinking about proper things. Lacan is clear: despite the obvious associations, despite what Freud said, don't imagine that the political thing, the human assembly or the legal proceeding, has anything to do with *it*, the real thing, the sublime object of desire.

No doubt, in the majority of languages both past and present, the thing-as-object is simply not bound to the thing-as-assembly in similar fashion. So, when Latour announces that "the very etymology of this ancient word – *chose*, *cause*, *res*, or *thing* – signals in all the languages

of Europe the weight of issues that must always be paid for with meetings," we are forced to recognize a rhetorical over-assertion. Surely not *all* the languages of Europe? And how might one demarcate the boundaries not just of such a set of languages but of Europe itself? This problem perhaps informs Lacan's own equivocation around the etymology of thing within the particular language from within which he thinks and speaks. Accordingly, "the synchrony of the signifier in current practice" must prevail against Freud's dubious insistence on a psychic reality shaped by linguistic transmission. It is as if the other meaning of thing within a discourse fuzzily named "European" must itself be othered, made use of, but then put to one side.

Yet, as described earlier, the disowning of a "European" etymology of the thing-as-assembly in favour of the elusive allure and withdrawal of the thing-as-object is precisely the way in which thinking the thing proceeds – in many versions of its conceptual formation – which is doubtless more heterogenous and inconsistent than its critics imagine, much like the political concept of Europe itself. For Latour, this is necessary if *Dingpolitik* is to overcome a certain "ding-less" fundamentalism that wants to bypass mediations and representations, whilst also acknowledging "the multiplicity of ways of assembling and disassembling and yet raise the question of the one common world" ("Realpolitik" 41). Exactly what is it about this other archaic version of the thing-as-assembly that each of these ways of thinking the thing is obliged to acknowledge but ultimately abandon? In other words, what is it, according to a psychoanalytic structure of disavowal that is itself organized around a particular inflection of the term, that must be repudiated in the thing? In what follows I suggest that staying with whatever is it that troubles the psychoanalytic ambivalence about the thing permits another point of access to the paradoxical workings of the thing as a political object.

the bare-naked thing

Lacan himself provides an answer to this question in his articulation of the divided subject of

psychoanalysis, organized around a scene of experience that remains outside of language, yet which both impels and subverts the symptoms and actions that the ego undergoes in the social world. Lacan's *das Ding* is a concept borrowed from one of Freud's earliest works, the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. But while Lacan will thoroughly "interiorize" *das Ding*, making it the bedrock of individual psychic experience, for Freud it originates from the outside, not in the form of an object, but of another person, the *Nebenmensch*: the other one, the one immediately next to me, the neighbour. While Freud never overtly returns to this idea of the *Nebenmensch*, it is clear that it is part of an extra-psychic reality, possessed of a real body. This body is *not* the mother-as-other or its equivalent, since "an object of a similar kind was the subject's first satisfying object (and also his first hostile object) as well as his sole assisting force" (Freud 393). This figure is a third, a disturbing new arrival on the scene of the infant-adult dyad, not just *the* other, but another other. Subsequently for Freud, Lacan and the rest of psychoanalysis, *das Ding* goes "indoors" and becomes part of the individual's psychic apparatus, an alterity that cannot be represented within that apparatus but around which it is insistently organized. This presence of the outside on the inside is something disturbing, something which the psyche seeks to cover over or foreclose and in doing so produces the range of symptoms that are the material of psychoanalysis itself. Whilst *das Ding* is clearly distinct from both the Heideggerian thing and the object/thing of object-oriented philosophy, they retain some shared features: hiddenness, withdrawnness, an intimate exteriority and an exterior intimacy (which Lacan coined as *extimacy*) and senses of anxiety, awe, dread and longing that paradoxically facilitate the emergence of creativity, love and hope.

In psychoanalysis, *das Ding* subsequently loses this direct association with the *Nebenmensch* and becomes the name of whatever that is opaque or missing at the centre of desire, after which the subject chases incessantly and hopelessly. This connection to

actual other beings is something that evidently resonates for Lacan in his opening remarks about *das Ding* but which he finds himself obliged to disavow. So, the answer to the question about what these various forms of thing-thinking seem to want to simultaneously abandon and draw near is neither the Other, nor the generic totality of other people, but rather the bodies and minds of specific others who do not share the same understanding of *thing* – both etymologically and politically – with whom I must somehow elaborate a shared world.

This political problem posed by the troubling physical presence of others resurfaces in more recent articulations of thing-politics. Here, the fantasy that needs to be abandoned is that politics only happens when people get together to talk about what they want to do together. Speaking of *Making Things Public*, the gargantuan exhibition he curated with Peter Weibel in 2005, Latour writes bluntly: "in this show, we simply want to pack loads of stuff into the empty arenas where naked people were supposed to assemble simply to talk" ("Realpolitik" 17).

This abjected scene of naked people talking in empty space echoes like a minor refrain across object-oriented politics. Thirty years after making the point, Latour still seeks to correct an understanding that would prioritize human-on-human action as the prime political mover, since

politics can never be based on a pre-existing society, and still less on a "state of nature" in which bands of half-naked humans end up coming together [...] [t]he exploration of successive alterations takes us in the opposite direction from this implausible scenography. (*Inquiry* 373)

In his detailed and thorough analysis of the shifts in Latour's political orientation, Graham Harman makes use of an argument put forward by Peer Schouten to suggest that this negative characterization of "naked" humans assembled to talk originates in Latour's early work on baboon societies (16–24). Lacking a socio-technical infrastructure,

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baboon-politics is hopelessly caught up with the micro-management of interpersonal contact, boundary-keeping and status maintenance. And while baboon relations are obviously mediated – by gesture, movement, choreography, vocalization, mating, grooming, feeding, parenting and violence – within a habitat that is itself quite complex, nothing like an enduring social or political institution is sustainable, despite what human fictions of ape societies might fantasize about. So, as Harman writes of Latour, “political stabilization relies on non-human actors even more than human ones [...] a group of naked people standing in a field would find it difficult to create durable institutions or power hierarchies” (18).

But from where does this recurring image of a fragile politics conducted by “naked people standing in a field” arise? The pejorative and colonial overtones are hard to ignore in these descriptions, despite the accompanying recognition that the political thing might take many forms in both pre- and post-colonial contexts, including those that are disinterested in Western notions of democracy and its formal institutions. The invocation of nakedness adds a troubling sexual dimension to this vision of a politics insufficiently mediated by non-human actors that I will return to later. Leaving aside these concerns for the moment, what I take from this vision is how its characterization of naked human politics seems to lead to opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of social complexity and cultural achievement: towards both an open arena of unmediated human contact and as an elaborate built environment (a stage theatre), fully equipped with mediating objects and representational apparatus. But isn't it the case that some of the most enduring and idealized images of human politics include those of humans standing in open space, whether in the ancient Athenian agora or the occupied city square? These scenes are in turn echoed in the fetishization of particular forms of outdoor performative space as the iconic appearance of the *demos*, whether in the Greek amphitheatre, the wooden O of the Shakespearean playhouse, in the temporary architecture of the contemporary protest

camp, or even in Spencer Tunick's photographs of hundreds of literally naked humans packed into otherwise empty urban spaces? Just as Heidegger and Lacan need to invoke the thing-as-assembly and then abandon it in order to set out their respective theories of the thing/*das Ding*, “naked” humans seem to keep elbowing their way back into the centre stage of a fully object-oriented politics. In doing so, they refuse to stay on the sidelines to which they have been consigned due to their catastrophic failure to take enough objects into account when it comes to reassembling the collective. This is not to demand the reinstatement of an anthropocentric politics or to contest that non-human objects are crucial political actors. But it is to reflect on the persistence of an anti-politics problematically figured as a theatre of a naked humanity talking to itself in an assembly-thing apparently stripped bare of all other non-human things.

There is an incommensurability between these different conceptions of the thing: the object as thing, the assembly as thing, the *Nebenmensch* or *das Ding* as thing, or something else entirely different from these “European” conceptualizations. Each is elaborated within divergent linguistic, cultural and theoretical frameworks, towards radically different ends, yet each draws tacitly on the others only to cast them off. Translated into philosophical terms, the blessing and the bane of the thing is that not only does it name *both* the object and the relation (the thing-as-object vs. the thing-as-assembly, what gathers things). In doing so, the thing contaminates a philosophy that is underpinned by its varied etymological associations with an undesirable desiring that appears simultaneously foreign to its own constitution. As much as a truly flat ontology might wish to treat the relation as also an object, the all-too human thing seems to intervene and resist its own heterogeneous elimination.

It seems that there are simply too many things going on with the thing, so that as much as it is an enabling concept that is good to think with, the thing now figures as a spanner in the works of any attempt to grasp

it. If so, perhaps it is time to give up on the thing and seek politics on more fertile ground. But in yet another instance of its everyday idiom, the phrase “the thing is ...” arrives to interrupt the plans and prospects of a “we” that might do something, make a decision, realize a plan or a project. “Sure, that sounds good, but the thing is ...” What is the thing introduced by *this* particular figure of speech? With “the thing is ...,” the thing mutates into something that interrupts and redirects what otherwise seems like the way “we” should go, introducing a subtle but intentional glitch into the smooth operation of an assumed human like-mindedness. With “the thing is ...,” a nameless non-human something is introduced from the outside into the midst of human talk: one thing is interposed in another thing.

there’s something about meeting

If one were to pick a single thing that might embody the anti-political image of naked (i.e., insufficiently mediated) humans talking in open space of today, it might be the meeting. But what exactly is a meeting? Search for an image of “meeting” online and you will find an endless series of pictures of humans talking – generally between three and twenty individuals are depicted – seated around a table in an anonymous corporate office environment. For sure, they are generally not naked and are surrounded by objects and things of all kinds – in addition to the tables and chairs, there are laptops, paper documents, plastic binders, paperclips, pens, whiteboards, a variety of types of coffee cup, water glasses, plates of biscuits or pastries, the odd vase of flowers or pot plant, as well the architecture of the room within which all these things sit. Taking into account the totality of these things, including the drawings on the whiteboards, the words in the documents, the images and data represented on the laptops and the chain of actants that connect to them far beyond the confines of the local physical space to say, oil pipelines, opencast coal mines, protest camps and receding glaciers, the path is relatively clear to reassembling a

Latourian collective of sorts, albeit of a rather culturally restricted and repetitive kind. But nevertheless, it is mostly humans talking that occupies the centre of the frame.

Earlier, the notion of “assemblism” was offered as a description of a Latourian politics and Latour’s introductory essay for *Making Things Public*, makes a clear bid for assembly as the real political thing: “What would a political space be that would not be ‘neo’? What would a truly contemporary style of assembly look like? It’s impossible to answer this question without gathering techniques of representation in different types of assemblies” (“Realpolitik” 31). But though in 2005 the assembly in its heterogenous forms looked like a good candidate for the Latourian political unit (a complex, hybrid apparatus of representation), less than a decade later in his *Modes of Existence* there is no such thing as an enduring assembly, since “‘behind’ politics there [is] nothing, and certainly not already-constituted ‘groups’” (note the inverted commas around words here, to remind us that these are purely fantasmal entities) because “there is no group without re-grouping, no re-grouping without mobilizing talk” (404). In this sense, a political institution is a more or less successful fiction as an object, though one that might last hundreds of years. Accordingly, an object-oriented politics must proceed full speed ahead with complexification, technological augmentation and infrastructural enhancement. Politics must take into account more objects with more mediation, leaving the fantasy-thing of unmediated, naked humans talking in a field far behind. There are only modes of assembling, dis-assembling and reassembling, grouping and re-grouping. Yet none of these things can take place without “mobilizing talk”? So where and when does this talk happen?

If the assembly has lost some of its political allure for Latour, then it may be that its substitution with its poor relation – meeting – is the price to pay for a continuing practice of political realism. Meetings are literally, as everyone already knows, talking shops – and all the better for it. This would seem to follow from Latour’s own recent prescription that “the

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weight of issues [...] must be paid for with meetings,” but with the added difference that meetings are psychosocial things saturated with human contact and unregulated sociality (which agendas, minutes, processes and procedures are expressly designed to control and order) that cannot be simply reassembled out of existence through the introduction of more and more objects into a politics of re-assembling. On the face of it, the meeting as a seemingly unremarkable genre of social and political life does not look like a promising philosophical or political object. Meeting seems like a pseudo-concept, somehow far too human, too middling-sized, lacking the charismatic aura of other concepts that object-oriented philosophy has borrowed or invented to define relation, such as symbiosis, entanglement or mesh. These terms seem capable of gathering the very small (the subatomic, the cellular) as well as the very large (hyperobjects, the planet, the cosmos). By comparison, meeting lacks all conviction. Yet, as I have tentatively explored elsewhere, it is precisely in its ubiquitous lack of promise and its promising ubiquity that meeting subtends the doing of politics (Bayly). As spaces and places where two or more people come together to talk about and decide on a common course of action, meetings are both abjected and idealized: spaces of intense but contingent sociality that are routinely ridiculed as useless and dreary. Yet they are also held up as an exemplary form for the realization of collective desires: after the Winter Palace or the Bastille has been stormed or the Vendôme column toppled or Gezi Park occupied, the time quickly comes for committees, communes, commissions and working parties to secure and sustain the revolutionary event – but they are also where the revolution will be clandestinely betrayed. As the exemplary thing that mixes together all the aspects and qualities of *thing* explored so far, the face-to-face meeting has not only survived the transition of the social into the digital platforms that connect individuals across time and space but has proliferated exponentially. More intensively mediated interaction has not replaced the

messy instability of face-to-face human contact, but vastly increased its presence, as more and more people apparently spend more and more time in more and more meetings (Allen et al. 3).

After spending considerable time attending meetings, researching them and imagining what a philosophy of meeting might look like, meeting itself seems to me more philosophically intractable rather than less. Meeting science has recently established itself at the intersection of organization studies, management science and social anthropology. Yet within the studies and narratives it produces, almost exclusively focused on the business meeting, the complex lived experience of meeting (with which most readers are very likely all too familiar) proves elusive and resistant to description. It may be that meeting itself stages a kind of resistance to an ordering that any science might seek to impose upon it. This project started with a skim-reading of hundreds of non-academic manuals on making meetings, published over the last 120 years or so. What is most interesting about the manuals is precisely an excessive manualization: a perpetual desire to devise a hands-on fix for meetings that axiomatically seem not to work. Over the decades, the solutions oscillate between applications of the hard technology of rules of order and the soft skills of facilitation and “dealing with difficult people.” Taking stock of a long history of very mixed feelings about meetings, one can understand that, against the manic insistence of the manuals, meetings are not simply about making decisions or planning a course of action, but that such things are necessary in order to ensure there are meetings.

The anthropologist Helen Schwartzman has written the first academic monograph that properly focused on the meeting as a specific social genre, published in 1989, and she was invited to write the concluding chapter of the recent *Cambridge Handbook of Meeting Science* some twenty-five years later. She titled her essay “There’s Something about Meetings,” noting that this subtle something seems to make both meeting researchers and

participants want to change, control and order meetings to make them predictable, whilst at the same time they remain utterly resistant to these efforts. But she never quite gets at what this “something” is, beyond an abstract dialectic of order and disorder.

So what is this “something” about meetings? As exemplified in its earliest embodiment in the figure of the *Nebenmensch*, psychoanalysis has from the outset been concerned about nothing else other than the something or someone that erotically agitates each of us in precise and particular ways. From a post-Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, when an enigmatic, unnameable but agitating something about anything makes itself present, this something is about sex. Now, on the face of it, for the sake of politics it would seem very important to keep sex and meetings as far apart as possible. Yet, as we have seen, they are brought palpably together in the repeated image of “naked” humans talking in open space that an object-oriented politics seeks to overcome. Returning to the widely cited Icelandic point of reference for the European thing-as-assembly, Gísli Pálsson reminds us the “*þing* denotes a (nice) object, assembly, county, court, gathering, festivity, love affair and sexual organ” (250). To draw attention to this particular conjunction of the sexual and the political is not to make a reductionist pronouncement that everything, including meetings or politics or power, is always just about sex in the final instance. But it is to insist, that in the final instance, there is no final instance: there is just this withdrawn “something”: a contradictory, intractable, awkward something. Not something as a placeholder waiting to be filled in with a specific sexual content, but something that is named by sex or the sexual in a way that does not quite work. This unsettling something that works to actively unwork or de-activate the subject is what is named by the Freud-Lacanian *Ding* (Zupančič 23–24).

As explored earlier, the notion of the thing as distinct from the object seems intimately connected with that which does not work or which has somehow failed, broken or been misused. To the extent that meetings so often

seem to not to work, or that meetings seem not to be work, or that they work in some minimal way that only enables them to bureaucratically reproduce themselves, they produce what might be called non-relation, relations that do not quite work. Meetings produce not just disagreement, or agreeing to disagree, agonism or antagonism, but something much more uncertain, intangible and properly enervating, where enervating describes a feeling of being both simultaneously energized and emptied out, agitated and depressed. If there is indeed “something” about meetings, then it is to do with the perhaps all too obvious fact, that the question of how to work together is structured around the disorienting force of non-relation, which is what makes relation – and its potential achievements called politics – collectively possible but also personally painful.

If so, the thing-as-meeting is, amongst other things, where a “we” is temporarily brought together in order to withdraw from itself – an active occasion of de-activation, a shared disaggregation. This evidently flies in the face of the supposed logic of modern meetings, ostensibly dedicated to the efficacy and efficiency of making collective or collaborative decisions that must be turned into actions. Yet, as is all too familiar, meetings are also where things are supposed to be decided or get done, but often never seem to be decided or done. And isn’t it because of this practice of non-doing that the things that really matter, the things that you want to do, might actually get done? And isn’t it also how one deals with the troublesome demand for the kinds of doing that *really* need to be left undone? Thankfully, those decisions can always be deferred to another meeting. Within the worlds of “developed” economies and representative democracies, the procedures and the protocols, the apologies and the agenda and AOB are the necessary means to facilitate that process – as mediating objects, they structure the eros of bureaucracy in which inactivity and indifference have a value equal to or greater than that of the activity and attention which current regimes of governance so relentlessly insist upon. In some obvious way, meetings cannot be politics.

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There seems something degrading and absurd about the reductive gesture that would make them so. As if to make the same point, Latour gives the example of two friends making an arrangement over the phone to meet at a future time and place as the basic example of the mode of existence that he labels *organization*, which is a mode that for him ought not to be confused with politics (*Inquiry* 390–400). But at the same time, as a well-known phrase has it from the American civil rights movement and many subsequent efforts towards more participative forms of democracy, “freedom is an endless meeting” (Polletta).

Meetings belong to multiple modes of existence as messy forms of relentlessly human encounter – however clearly mediated by all kinds of objects – that shadow the always upstanding political models of demarcation and segregation organized by the assembly. Furthermore, they are the times and spaces in which, until fairly recently, much of the majority (non-Western, non-European) world conducted its politics. While the modern meeting is often the subject of ridicule, satire or conspiracy, the Vietnamese-American writer and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha evokes an altogether different experience in a story that I beg the reader's indulgence to quote in full:

In a remote village, people have decided to get together to discuss certain matters of capital importance to the well-being of their community. A meeting is thus fixed for a definite date at the marketplace at nightfall. On the day and at the time agreed, each member eats, washes her/himself, and arrives only when s/he is ready. Things proceed smoothly as usual, and the discussion does not have to begin at a precise time, since it does not break in on daily village life but slips naturally into it. A mother continues to bathe her child amidst the group; two men go on playing a game they have started; a woman finishes braiding another woman's hair. These activities do not prevent their listening or intervening when necessary. Never does one open the discussion by coming right to

the heart of the matter. For the heart of the matter is always somewhere else than where it is supposed to be. To allow it to emerge, people approach it indirectly by postponing until it matures, by letting it come when it is ready to come. There is no catching, no pushing, no directing, no breaking through, no need for a linear progression which gives the comforting illusion that one knows where one goes. Time and space are not something entirely exterior to oneself, something that one has, keeps, saves, wastes, or loses. Thus, even though one meets to discuss, for example, the problem of survival with this year's crops, one begins to speak of so-and-so who has left his wife, children, family, and village in search of a job in the city and has not given any news since then, or of the neighbor's goats which have eaten so-and-so's millet. The conversation moves from the difficulties caused by rural depopulation to the need to construct goat pens, then wanders in old sayings and remembrances of events that occurred long ago [...] A man starts singing softly and playing his lute. Murmurs, laughter, and snatches of conversation mingle under the moonlight. Some women drowse on a mat they have spread on the ground and wake up when they are spoken to. The discussion lingers on late into the night. By the end of the meeting, everyone has spoken. The chief of the village does not “have the floor” for himself, nor does he talk more than anyone else. He is there to listen, to absorb, and to ascertain at the close what everybody has already felt or grown to feel during the session. (1–2)

In this timeless, nameless and placeless story, the meeting is no doubt romanticized, idealized and even exoticized as the bucolic manifestation of an all-inclusive body politic. But the text evokes a kind of political enjoyment that takes us very far from, for example, the narrative of “death by meeting” announced by a recent management book that offers itself as a “leadership fable about solving the most painful problem in business” (Lencioni, title page). In their way of doing *dingpolitik*, Trinh's villagers seem to participate in a

collective political *jouissance* that preoccupies a Western democratic imagination, as a pleasure that has either been stolen from it or only enjoyed by those imagined as wishing to destroy it.

Strung out between its deathly and life-affirming possibilities, what seems to be at work in the meeting is precisely what or who does not work – which, for example, drifts off, sleeps, gossips, interjects witty or irrelevant remarks, plays or doodles or makes music or gets on with some other personal task. Trinh’s *thing* has evidently come together to transact important, even painful, political business but its proceedings are vague and indirect, moving incessantly between the present and the past, the material and the spiritual, sleeping and waking, talking and listening, holding back and holding forth. It is this complex, active inactivity – something that does not work, something both recreational and procreational – that distinguishes (or perhaps indistinguishes) the meeting. What is foregrounded is its indiscernibility from the everyday operations of the care of the self and others, especially when compared to the complicated procedures and virile dynamism of the Western fetish of the assembly. It is precisely this all-too-human quality of thing-politics that an object-oriented politics is obliged to repeatedly acknowledge as its own, through a not-so-subtle disavowal of the disquieting scene of “naked” humans talking in a field.

Is a politics or philosophy of meeting worth pursuing? A philosophy of the thing-that-is-not-quite-a-thing risks running up against the sheer underwhelming nebulosity of its object. Nevertheless, this essay has attempted to show that there is indeed something about meetings that is worth spending time with, even if only because the pursuit of any sort of politics will mean spending time in them. If this something remains in need of further elaboration, by way of a conclusion here, I offer an illustration as the opening item on the agenda of such a project.

Figure 1 shows a well-known painting by Rembrandt, *Syndics of the Drapers’ Guild*,

painted in 1662. It shows a group of Dutch merchants, dressed and coiffured almost identically, clustered around a covered table on which is some kind of book or ledger.

The syndics (or sample masters) are meeting, as they did three times a week, to judge the quality of incoming cloth delivered to Amsterdam from the Dutch colonial trading empire, material that was the cornerstone of a newly emerging entrepreneurial capitalism. These men are all historically identifiable figures, their names and dates of their births and deaths clearly established. They commissioned the painting themselves. According to most sources, they are examining a length of cloth of Persian origin stretched out on the table against a swatch book. In the painting, they all look up and out of the scene, as if interrupted from their civic business by the arrival of both the painter and us, the viewers.

Rembrandt himself had been made bankrupt for all intents and purposes in the years just prior to this commission, apparently brought low by his taste for expensive works of art, antiquities and curiosities of natural history brought back by Dutch traders. He was renting a small house and was effectively an employee of a company owned by Hendrickje Stoffels, his lover, a former maidservant, and his only surviving child, Titus. Since he had been banned from the painters’ guild due to his ongoing unmarried relationship with Hendrickje, the painter was unable to compete directly for commissions himself and so work could only be had through this ad hoc corporate structure. Perhaps this painting is a description of his perspective on that depressing state of affairs, as much as it is a description of the situation of the sample makers themselves, looking at Rembrandt and at us.

In plays of this period, characters often are described in stage directions or in dialogue as “withdrawing.” But where we might expect an invitation to withdraw as an invitation to leave the stage and go our separate ways, in these dramas to withdraw is to meet, gather or assemble in another place, out of sight and earshot, in order to discuss matters of urgent mutual importance. In this sense, to withdraw is to



Fig. 1. *Syndics of the Drapers' Guild*, Rembrandt van Rijn, 1662. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

absent oneself from a public scene in order to appear with others elsewhere in private, in a more or less clandestine manner. Something or someone appears that must then be subtracted. Like attending one meeting in order to announce that you have to leave to attend another, presumably more important meeting, to which the people at the first meeting are not invited. As is the case with the object of object-oriented ontologies, something in the *Syndics of the Drapers' Guild* is withdrawn in this way, something draped in an affective aura best described by Roland Barthes writing about the topic of autarky in his lecture series *How to Live Together*:

But what's fascination of the "small group" (the gang, the sanatorium)? The state of autarky (autarky: self-sufficiency, contentedness) = plenitude. It's not the emptiness that draws us in, it's the fullness of, if you prefer, the intuition that there's a vertiginous vacuity to the plenitude of the group [...] Autarky: a structure made up of subjects, a little "colony" that requires nothing beyond the internal life of its constituents [...] A group in a state of autarkic Living-Together → a sort of smug pride, a self-satisfaction (in the Greek sense of the word)

that's fascinating to someone looking on from the outside. (36)

In the painting, the space through which this smug withdrawal is staged is the open book at the centre of the image and also at the centre of the drapers' attention, from which our arrival has apparently distracted them. We cannot see what is written in the book, nor are we permitted to see it. It is private business, for their eyes only.

Earlier, I mentioned that the book is a swatch book, with which the drapers are ostensibly comparing and judging the cloth on the table beneath it. Most people seem happy with this description, including the curators of the Rijksmuseum where the painting hangs today, who describe it as such in their online catalogue. What the image seems to show is important but humble men occupied in a meeting, engaged with the material objects of their profession, sampled in the book and displayed on their table, doing their civic duty. It would not be too difficult to construe the polite scene depicted here as a particular node or assembly point in a chain of actors and actants, stretching out to the more brutal edges of the expanding Dutch colonial

empire, mediated by the intervening ships, sailors, slaves, cannons, gunpowder, sextants, compasses, tides, storms, wind and so forth that have brought the cloth to the table. But even a cursory glance at the pages of the book suggests that it is very unlikely to contain swatches of fabric, which would surely bulk out the pages far more than is shown. So, let us attempt another description of this book, whose contents are withdrawn from our lowly gaze, a description offered more recently by the art historian Benjamin Binstock.

As is well established, Rembrandt made several sketches for this painting on used account book paper, obvious as such through the vertical red lines and numerical calculations visible on their reverse sides. Through some virtuoso art historical detective work, complete with re-enactments and simulations, Binstock asks us to consider that Rembrandt, lacking the means for new art materials, even paper, made the sketches direct from life on pages in the drapers' own accounts, which were subsequently removed from the original ledger, before that was later destroyed by fire in the city archives many years later. For example, if we pay *very* close attention to the page that one of the drapers holds in his hand, the silhouette of the hat of the sample master called van Loon, seated on the far left and depicted in one of the sketches, appears in a ghostly outline through the page itself.

If we find this description persuasive, the sample masters are actually not at work in the meeting depicted in the painting, doing the public good of judging the quality of cloth to ensure the prosperity of the city's trade. They are busy with themselves, since the figures they examine in the account book are their own likenesses. What the painting thus describes is a private, homosocial society of mutual self-regard and self-appreciation made up of gestures, glances and gazes, composed into various micro-performances of competition for status, which are in turn staged in a quietly theatrical tableau. If, as Barthes suggests, there is something fascinating about the vertiginous vacuity to the plenitude of the

small group, what we are recruited to perversely enjoy as viewers of this particular meeting is the genteel making of its own self-image, a particular "we" from which we are politely but firmly excluded.

With this image, constructed in the emergence of European modernity and its exploitation of the human and material resources of the "new world" (where radically different ways of doing politics were encountered), Rembrandt provides an insight into the working of everyday politics that operates below the level of things made public. It looks like there's a meeting going on, which is what these people do day in and day out, all apparently in the name of quality control and the public good. But, upon closer inspection, there is no assembly here, open to public purview. The very absence of such a public is perhaps also a fact that the impoverished Rembrandt is seeking to dramatize with the sly civility of his image-making – shot through with the irony that this picture is a private commission and that its sole audience will be the men depicted in it, along with their colleagues and close associates. Instead, what is revealed is the operation of the peculiar "something" about meeting that this essay has sought to articulate as subtending a thing-politics of public assembly: the awkward tenacity of a bodily human sociality that refuses to be mediated out of existence. Among the faces, gestures and glances of the syndics, there manifests the stubborn persistence of the commanding thing – in all its variants – to disorient and supplant the work of an ostensibly democratic, object-oriented polity and its ever-expanding networks of incessant industriousness. Enjoy!



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1 The contexts of the uses of *thing* in Heidegger and Lacan are addressed below. Garcia's ontology of the thing is too complex and elusive to properly elaborate here, but what is most important for the argument is its highly nuanced characterization of something as a thing as utterly distinct from its existence as an object. See Garcia.

2 The affective characterization of things, objects, matter and material in this way is widespread in the work of authors who might be said to loosely constellate around an investment in them, including Graham Harman, Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, Timothy Morton, Jane Bennett, Katherine Behar, Tristan Garcia, Ian Hodder and Karen Barad, notwithstanding the profound differences and antagonisms between their ontologies and perspectives.

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