It’s not every day that a sociologist has an art exhibit, but Bruno Latour is not your everyday sociologist. Recently, the French scholar teamed up with Peter Weibel, a well-known artist and the curator of the Center for Art and Media (ZKM), a world leader in visual arts and new media located in Karlsruhe, on the border between France and Germany. Their first exhibition, “Iconoclash” (2002), documented the “image wars”: the various attempts to destroy, to prohibit, or to protect and cherish religious as well as scientific and artistic images of God, nature, and humanity.

The second exhibition, “Making Things Public,” arrived last summer. It concerns what Latour and Weibel call the “atmospheres of democracy” and pairs an impressive range of philosophers, historians, and sociologists from Western and Central Europe and the United States with visual artists. Their task: to display the variety of media that citizens in modern democracies use to voice their claims. The exhibition catalogues the diverse ways in which political collectives have represented themselves with these thing-like objects, from 14th-century Italy to contemporary American life, from stock markets to wildlife conservatories, from revolutionary France to Eastern European protests against communist regimes.

Entering the exhibition, the visitor cannot help but feel disoriented. The first images screened on the vast luminescent walls are familiar pictures of political figures. From afar, they look like standard portraits of Bin Laden and President Bush. Moving closer, however, one can see that they are mosaics of little pictures. The portrait of President Bush is made up of American soldiers who died in Iraq; the one of Bin Laden, published on September 11, 2002, in Le Monde, is composed of photos of victims of the September 11 attacks.

These two images ask: Can political leaders be identified with the victims of their wars? With the public they claim to personify? With their enemies? Their answer is no. As Dario Gamboni explains in the catalog, composite images like those of Bush and Bin Laden “have mushroomed worldwide” since 2001. They “have been employed to attack publicly and to literally ‘de-face’ self-appointed and elected leaders, in a technologically updated version of the ‘images of infamy’ of early modern Europe.”

Western political philosophy usually assumes the possibility and the desirability of a tight relationship between the public and the sovereign. Recall the image of the Leviathan engraved on the first edition of Hobbes’s classic essay. The public’s interest is mechanically represented in the image of the sovereign, as in the two portraits of Bush and Bin Laden. The image of the Leviathan is recomposed for the show in Niceron’s machine, an optical device that yields an effect quite similar to that of the Bush and Bin Laden posters. Like the software used to compose the two previous posters, Niceron’s machine mechanically aggregates scattered elements to form the Leviathan. As Simon Schaffer notes in the catalog, Hobbes thought this optical device miraculously illustrated the deductive mode of reasoning he proposed in political philosophy. For Hobbes, the institution of a Leviathan is deduced from basic logic, as it is the only rational solution addressing the problem of individuals’ security. The logic of the aggregation of the individual wills constituting the sovereign is as “mechanical” as the optical effect in Niceron’s machine.

This deductive approach, because of which we still regard Hobbes as a founder of our rationalist political philosophy, is exactly what the curators want to challenge. What we need, they argue, is not a new logical treatise explaining what the public’s best interest is or by which individual it should be represented—Bush or Bin Laden, as if there were no other choices—but a display of the myriad “things” that empower the publics, allowing them to voice their desires. This exhibition is a statement of political philosophy rather than the traditional gathering of works of art that we expect. It claims to give a public existence to the media needed for publics to voice their claims in a democracy, as well as to reinvent political philosophy. These are bold claims, but the curators are not known for making modest assertions.

The exhibition identifies key media that must become public if a democracy is to work. An impressive installation by Ben Rubin, for instance, presents “over 2,000 pages of software code, a printout of 49,609 lines of C++” that con-
stitute the source code of the voting machines used in the 2004 U.S. elections. The code, obtained freely on the Internet after a security failure in 2002, has been blacked out in order to comply with trade laws, since it is in fact privately owned. As Ben Rubin writes, “What is on display is not the forbidden source code but rather the state of affairs in which we find ourselves today, one in which the critical infrastructure of democracy in the United States is becoming privately owned and, being private, is also being made secret.”

In a similar vein, Peter Galison’s riveting documentary reminds us of the ongoing struggle between governments and publics to control knowledge—particularly scientific knowledge. His film focuses on the American “classifiers” whose job is to assess the level of secrecy required of documents initially conceived as public. It shows how postwar planners “established the isomorphism between the national security and trade secret,” in order to remove knowledge from the public’s eyes and ears. Following such rules, the private world of knowledge has come to thwart the public one. Think about the “4 million people who hold clearance in the U.S.” compared to the “500,000 college professors,” “the estimated 250 million classified pages of last year,” compared to the “60 million pages” acquired by public libraries in the United States. We live, Galison writes, in “a modest information booth facing outwards, our unseeing backs to a vast and classified empire we barely know.” The private ownership and control of public representations undermines modern democracies; “freedom of thought” takes place within a cave.

Hence the question asked by the curators: How can we organize public debates about new technological artifacts (voting machines, genetically modified organisms, uranium-enrichment processes, missile-guidance systems, lasers, and so on) when most of these things are invented behind the closed doors of the national security establishment and privately owned companies?

The exhibition catalog develops a series of case studies on the media used by different publics to defend their right to participate in public life. For instance, Jean-Philippe Heurtin analyzes the political debates about the “moral architecture” of French revolutionary parliaments. Miniature reproductions of such “assemblies” were on display in the exhibition. Heurtin shows what forms of public expression were considered legitimate during the Revolution, and what sort of architectural form (circular, semicircular, etc.) corresponded to each philosophy. The Jacobins, who wanted a circular Parliament, aimed at creating the “emotional epiphany of the General Will,” associated with circular parliaments. They wrote, “We want no more speeches, no more correspondence, what we want is silent sittings, where each divines from the eyes of the other what is to be done, and where all that is needed is to relate to the expression in those eyes.” Heurtin shows that allowing the “critical expression of the people” was at stake in the adoption of a semicircular Parliament. The presence of the public ear in parliamentary debates opens politics to democracy as we know it.

Ana Miljakić shows how streets can be turned into political arenas. She has chosen films made between 1964 and 2000 from Yugoslavian television to show how Yugoslavia has arranged streets and crowds during official parades. The public obediently followed scripts, sang official songs, and engaged in what she calls the “directed participation” of the “communist masses.” The documentaries show an extraordinary moment, captured live on TV: the moment when the “public” comes to existence, when they disrupt the communist script and become a democratic crowd, taking back the “streets to speak in their own name, reclaiming the oldest medium for collective representation: the city.”

Christian Nold adds that every democratic crowd is torn between these two imperatives: to leave enough freedom of expression to enable the representation of the public’s diversity, and to discipline the public so that its strength can be assessed and made “legible” by the government. Nold argues that certain technologies help the public to live up to these two contradictory goals. He describes the technologies used to count protesters, from the first petitions and images used by the British Chartists to the aerial photographs of San Francisco used by protesters against the Iraq war to challenge official numbers.

The philosophers, social scientists, and artists gathered in
the exhibition offer a reassuring list of the historical solutions to the problem of representing the public in democratic assemblies. Yet, in focusing on the media necessary for associations—and public associations—to come to existence, the exhibition leaves the question of sovereignty aside. It provides a theory of association, asking How do individuals bond together and form publics? But it does not tackle the theory of sovereignty—as opposed to Hobbes, who tried to tie together both theories. It is a serious gap, because we need to know on behalf of what authority one sovereign will be granted the right to have the last word by choosing to end public debates and dissolve public concerns.

Two works at least raise the issue of sovereignty with humor. The “pneumatic parliament,” is a mock “German/American joint venture in collaboration with the Air Force” imagined by Peter Sloterdijk in collaboration with a team of architects. Their parliament inflates “in a mere one and a half hours” to provide “a protective shell for parliamentary meetings” and “the architectonic prerequisites for the democratic process.” This project reveals the absurdity underlining the idea that projecting an artifact in a distant context is all that one needs to do to engage in democratic politics. Its authors show that the media serve no role in democratic politics if the public they connect is not given sovereignty over its territory, if it is not given the right to have the last word on its decisions.
She felt herself connected at present with the way people felt when they had to write certain things down — she was connected by her feelings of anger, of petty outrage (perhaps it was petty?), and her excitement at what she was doing to Neal, to pay him back. But the life she was carrying herself into might not give her anybody to be angry at, or anybody who owed her anything, anybody who could possibly be rewarded or punished or truly affected by what she might do. Her feelings might become of no importance to anybody but herself, and yet they would be bulging up inside her, squeezing her heart and breath. — Alice Munro, “Floating Bridge”

A huge map of “World Government” presented on the gigantic transparent walls of the exhibition leads to the same question. Prepared by a collective of young sociologists and artists, “Bureau d’Etudes,” it utilizes interlocking directories to map out the private networks of global power. We can follow the links in the network called the “state-controlled complex,” move along the shores of the “the agro-business cartel” and then reach the nodes of the “psychological complex.” The whole picture of the World Government conveys the same lessons as the frescoes on the “Bad Government,” painted in Sienna by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, which are also presented in the exhibition. It connects the key players in the game of global power, tells us where global political decisions take place, and illuminates how different players bond together. But it does not tell us whether this “World Government” is really granted sovereignty over the earth, and if so, what would be the origin of this sovereignty. How is sovereignty granted here? Is the question obsolete? Maybe this could be the question of a follow-up exhibition.

Bruno Latour made his name demonstrating the significance of media for the production of scientific knowledge. With this exhibition, and its catalog compiling more than 130 accessible articles on media and politics, he replicates this analysis of the thing-like character of our world, this time within the terrain of political philosophy. The exhibition presents many interesting artifacts, and its catalog is impressive for its historical breadth, the intellectual quality of most contributions, and the accessibility of its language. It also does a great job of presenting the tradition in political philosophy from which these authors come—the pragmatism of John Dewey and the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger. It should receive tremendous attention in the years to come.

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