This is the pre-publication submitted version of the following piece:
*Journal of Historical Geography* (2007), 33, 459-461.


This collection is an accompaniment to an exhibition of the same name and curated by the two editors held at the ZKM Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe between March and August 2005 (you can visit the exhibition virtually at [http://makingthingspublic.zkm.de/](http://makingthingspublic.zkm.de/)). It is a very big book, sometimes seeming to be all encompassing, but sometime actually quite narrowly focussed. It consists of more than one hundred relatively short essays by writers, artists, and academics, divided into fifteen loosely themed ‘Chapters’. Some of the essays are theoretical statements, some are provocations, some provide empirical and historical case studies, and some report on experimental projects to conjure new publics into existence. Scattered through these are easily digestible gobbets from writers such as Swift, Heidegger, Sieye’s and Dewey on the interrelated themes of words, objects, representation and publicness. It is, fittingly enough, lavishly illustrated with photographs, drawings, prints and maps. This all goes to make up a genuinely heterogeneous assemblage of ideas around the practices and technologies of public life.

The contributions are gathered together around an opening theoretical essay by Bruno Latour. This essay provides the frame through which, one suspects, this collection will be trumpeted as path-breaking e it certainly spells out the claims for originality made in the marketing for the book. Latour’s intention, and the pitch of the book as a whole, is to recover the materiality of political representation by taking seriously, in fact by taking
literally, the idea of things being made public. He contends at the outset that political philosophy from ‘Hobbes to Rawls, from Rousseau to Habermas’ suffers from ‘object-avoidance’ (p.15), in so far as its overriding concern with questions of procedure in defining how a public should be properly constituted means that ‘when it comes down to what is at issue, namely the object of concern that brings them together, not a word is uttered’ (p.16).

This claim is nonsense, of course, but it enables Latour to make a great deal out of the etymology of res publica. He suggests that the thingyness implied by the res in res publica needs to be restored. What he calls an ‘object-oriented’ approach to democracy would recover what is to be considered a public matter as well as who is to be concerned (p.16). The idea that these matters have not been a topic for democratic theory before now is a little hard to sustain from ‘Hobbes to Rawls, from Rousseau to Habermas’, political philosophy has been all about what should be a proper object of public concern and this question has been intimately related to the question of what are the appropriate mediums for convening around them and acting in relation to them. Rather than claiming that not a word has been uttered about them, which is just not true, a more fruitful line of inquiry would be to explore just how these relationships have been framed, and in particular how the ‘who’ of public life has always been empirically and normatively overdetermined by the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of public assembly.

The line, repeated throughout the book, that there is ‘no representation without mediation’ is an interesting and important one, and there is a wealth of material in this collection to provoke new questions about just what this might imply for practices of legitimacy, justification, and accountability (although there is not much serious reflection on these normative issues, beyond a recurring theme of being more inclusive about what topics and which actors might make up publics). It should also be said that, in its insistence on thinking of publicness with reference to the theme of assembling and gathering, the collection is much less expansive
than it appears at first to be. Focussing on various types of assembly and technologies of assemblage allows all sorts of interesting analogies and differences to be explored in the collection. Religious assemblies, scientific publics, natural assemblages, technological infrastructures, technologies of inscription, economic forms are all presented as types of assembly, modes of assemblage, and it is left to the reader to draw the comparative lessons from this set of juxtapositions. But after a while, the rhetorical force of the assembly analogy can wear a bit thing e just because a public might be thought of as a type of assembly, it doesn’t follow that all types of assembly count as public. And not the least reason for this is that the quality of assembly or gathering together which is privileged in this collection is, in fact, only one facet usually ascribed to ‘public’ things and ‘public’ matters. There is a danger that in reasserting the ‘materiality’ of publicness one ends up with far too tangible a sense of what makes a public a public as distinct from some other forms of collectivity. A consideration of the play of absence implied by the concept of representation deserves more attention than this new style of materialism can provide; the degree to which publics are constituted by scattering and dissemination rather than by gathering together is obscured by the insistence on the assembled qualities of publics reiterated here; and the degree to which publics are constituted by a particular style of address is difficult to analyse if one is so insistent on disdaining ‘discourse’ in favour of ‘materiality’.

This is a wonderful collection, full of gems of insight and beautiful provocations. Just don’t believe the hype.