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The Status of the Object
Performances, Mediations, and Techniques

Dick Pels, Kevin Hetherington and Frédéric Vandenberghe

To the Things Themselves?

OBJECTS ARE back in strength in contemporary social theory. Whether in the shape of commodities, machines, communication technologies, foodstuffs, artworks, urban spaces, or risk phenomena in a thoroughly socialized nature, a new world of materialities and objectivities has emerged with an urgency which has turned them into new sites of perplexity and controversy. After poststructuralism and constructivism had melted everything that was solid into air, it was perhaps time that we noticed once again the sensuous immediacy of the objects we live, work and converse with, in which we routinely place our trust, which we love and hate, which bind us as much as we bind them. High time perhaps also, after this panegyric of textuality and discursivity, to catch our theoretical sensibilities on the hard edges of our social world again, to feel the sheer force of things which strike back at us with unexpected violence, in the form of traffic jams, rail accidents, information overload, environmental pollution, or new technologies of terrorism. Perhaps the most intriguing feature of this new constellation is our (re)discovery of the multiple new ways in which social and material relations are entangled together, blurring conventional distinctions between the software and hardware of our social lives. Talking to intelligent machines, reconstructing our bodies with the help of prosthetic and genomic technologies, being glued to mobile phones, roving around in cyberspace, indulging in humanoid robotic phantasies, is to mingle our humanity with not-so-mute, active, performative objects in a way which we find equally fascinating as disconcerting. The prime objective of this special

issue is to further explore some of the modes, spaces, contradictions, mediations and ethical dilemmas of this co-performance of sociality/materiality.

One key theoretical challenge which has arisen in the past decades is how we can rethink traditional conceptions about the performance of social order in the face of this newly appreciated impact of material environments and the socializing effect of 'things'. In view of the weakening of traditional views of social reality as an entirely social realm, a familiar issue has resurfaced: what holds society in place? If (post)modern individualizing societies are able to survive on much less structure, cohesion, or foundation than social theorists have generally assumed, how much cement, how much 'existence' does the social actually need? And what is the stuff that it is made of? Various new approaches in the anthropology and geography of material culture, in science and technology studies, and in the new sociologies of consumption and risk culture, have pointed towards an understanding of the performative and integrative capacity of 'things' to help make what we call society. By emphasizing how much the social is ordered, held, and 'fixed' by the material, these new approaches have posed critical challenges to mainstream social theory, which until recently has only been marginally interested in relationships between humans and non-humans, culture and nature, or society and technology.

But the issue is not just one of order. If we still need to ask this old sociological question about order being held in place we need to add a further one: 'what makes society move?' The current concern with mobilities, fluidities and flows (Lash and Urry, 1994; Urry, 2000) needs to be read alongside that of stability; and materiality is equally implicated in this issue of fluidity. Perhaps Simmel had it (partially) right all along. It is a question of bridges and doors and the constitution of a 'will to connection' (Simmel, 1994: 6; cf. Hetherington, 1997). But whereas for Simmel it was human meaning generating social action that was the start for all desires to connect up the world, for many of the contributors in this volume it is not so much what materials (like the bridge or door) symbolize within social action that matters but their constitutive agentic effects within the entangled networks of sociality/materiality. That is either the basic starting point or the point of critique that is addressed by the articles within this issue. One assumption made in a number of the articles presented here is that materials are not things given meaning by a volitional will but are taken as 'actants'; their agency is understood as constituted as a relational and non-volitional 'will-as-force' (cf. Brown and Capdevila, 1999).

The present issue (which is based on the proceedings of a conference held at Brunel University in early September 1999) reflects some interesting cross-fertilizations between these various 'new materialisms', and forges critical links with more classical tropes and themes in the history of thinking about institutionalization, reification, fetishism, mediation and the 'realization' of the social. By focusing more intently upon the social life of things and the expressive, retroactive, or 'interpellating' effects which they have on human activity, its purpose is to reinvigorate and possibly alter the terms

of classical debates about idealism vs materialism, realism vs constructivism, agency vs structure, or essentialism vs fluidity and difference.

The need to address issues about nature, technology, the body, foodstuffs, mobility, the (un)planning of space, and new media of communication, has hastened the emergence of new social studies which make a success of cross-disciplinary work and increasingly appear as successors to the 19th-century disciplines. In Benjamin's familiar concept of constellation, these studies put 'the object' in place of the sun and map out in a non-Euclidean way the multiplicity of contributory disciplines (such as philosophy, sociology, law, geography, psychoanalysis, history) and approaches within and across these disciplines (actor-network theory, material cultural studies, postmodern and post-colonial theory, critical theory), that analyse different objects (substances, fetishes, trains, chocolate, computers, marbles – and so on). The articles in this issue exemplify some of these new orientations towards the object, objectification and objectivity, providing a cutting-edge overview of exciting new bridges and doors into social and cultural studies.

Let us get rid of the impossible question right away: what are things? What counts as an object? The impossibility of this question is already reflected in an etymological lineage which suggests indetermination and essential contestability. The hope and fate of the notion of the *res*, which has furnished the etymological root for both our conceptualization of 'thingness' and that of 'reality', is to be chronically in deliberation, in process, up for grabs. In Roman and Germanic languages, 'thing' (*causa, Sache, Ding, Thang*) originally stood for 'trial', 'lawsuit', 'judiciary assembly', 'deliberation', or 'accusation'. Linguistic expressions such as 'thing' or 'cause' are hence themselves a product of a reified process (Elster, 1985: 80; cf. Serres, 1982; Pitkin, 1987). Ob-jects are material things which are 'thrown out' (Serres, 1991) into our path; but 'to object' is raising a verbal accusation or difference which stands against our own point of view (cf. Daston, 2000: 2). The world of things which we routinely inhabit has of course always extended far beyond raw tangible matter and 'really existing' realities into the vast realm of the abstract, the invisible, the imaginary, and the virtual (McLuhan, 1987; Strathern, 1991). In a culture which favours bricolage, simulation, performativity and acting-as-if, we have increasingly learned to calculate and play with this radical indeterminacy between the real, the not-so-real and the imaginary. Increasingly, we have also come to appreciate the fluidity and instability of the (multiple) ontological boundaries which separate thinglike from nonthinglike entities (persons, animals, relations, concepts), in a growing discomfort about the traditional hierarchies which separated subjects from objects, cultures from natures, and humans from nonhumans.

Reification and Fetishism

In view of these indeterminacies, it might be illuminating to revisit two classical sites of controversy which have offered frameworks for theorizing

this three-sided interplay between materiality, immateriality, and sociality: *reification* and *fetishism*. Originally, both discourses were centred upon a critical trope which targeted the illegitimate confusion between things and nonthings. Reification, of course, refers to the unwarranted transposition of human relations, processes, actions and concepts into impersonal, nonhuman objects, and hence implies a double denunciation of the alienating autonomization of both intellectual concepts and social structures (cf. Vandenberghe, 1997–1998, 2001). Fetishism has conventionally indicated the reverse process of the personification and 'agent-ification' of material objects, which are thought to be possessed by spiritual, even supernatural forces, and command a unique reverence as a result of this magical attribution (cf. Pietz, 1985, 1987, 1988). In both cases, critical theory strives to 'unmask' these seemingly inherent powers of agency as alienated and phantasmagoric representations of human definitions and performances, reducing what appear to be natural properties which emanate from the object itself as delegated actions and properties of humans. Because of this symmetrical ontological confusion, which juxtaposes the thing-ification of human actions and definitions to the personification and spiritualization of things, the critical vocabularies of reification and fetishism emerge as crucial sites of perplexity as soon as the ontological boundary between subjects and objects is rendered equally problematic and fluid as the epistemological boundary between the imaginary and the real. The idioms of reification and fetishism therefore offer themselves as intriguing templates for rethinking the relationship between sociality and materiality in conditions of ontological uncertainty in which the demarcation between the world of things and the world of persons is losing its former obviousness and solidity.

A thumbnail sketch of the shared history of the two terms reveals a conceptual rift which increasingly relegated the discourse of reification to the idealist and 'meta-physical' side of the grand modernist binary between idealism and materialism (pace Feuerbach, Lukács and Debord), while the trope of fetishism tended to linger at the opposite materialist side (Marx). In the 'primordial scene' of the debates among the Young Hegelians during the 1830s and 1840s, the critical theory of reification emerged in the middle of a philosophical battle in the course of which Marx turned Hegelian spiritualism 'back upon its feet', in order to ground the critique of religious alienation in the muddy reality of alienated practices of material production. His famous analysis of commodity fetishism immediately connected the reification of social institutions, e.g. of the social division of labour, to the alienating materiality of commodity exchange in the capitalist market. The commodity fetish was a 'sensuous supersensuous thing' which had a semblance of singularity and autonomy; but it simultaneously enacted social relations and definitions which were quasi-naturalistically inscribed in the material properties of the commodified object itself. This naturalistic concealment of sociality in materiality was analogous to the reversal which was operated by religious consciousness, which made 'the productions of

the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life' which entered into relations both with one another and with their human producers (Marx, 1977 [1867]: 77). Both the personification of things and the reification of persons were analytically anchored in the realm of material production, while the reification of cultural and political forms was seen as a secondary result of this primordial alienation.

The subsequent history of the concept of reification, as it can be traced from Lukács and the Frankfurt School to Gabel, Debord, Baudrillard and beyond, showed a progressive generalization towards a comprehensive theory of symbolic structures which progressively extinguished the Marxian base-superstructure problematic, moving away from the material groundings in which the theory of fetishism remained constitutionally rooted. This partial parting of the ways between the two vocabularies reflected the broader culturalization of social theory which spans the course of the 20th century. Effectively reasserting the dualism between idealism and materialism, it increasingly incorporated the world of things as a backdrop (screen) to and object of practices of symbolic signification and meaningful classification. In the classical sociological tradition, the 'thingness' or material density of social structures was preferably seen as resulting from the force of collective representations (cf. Durkheim's methodological rule to consider social facts as things); and where the critical figure of reification was retained, the emphasis was upon the way in which institutional facts mystified the true nature of human activity, which itself tended to be conceived on the model and as a modality of consciousness rather than as material labour or practice (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The 'cultural turn' which was so massively exemplified by 20th-century intellectual currents such as structuralism, poststructuralism, semiotics, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and hermeneutics, generically favoured the view that material entities primarily existed as envelopes of meaning, acquiring their social presence as a result of processes of linguistic coding and discursive interpretation.

The general outcome was that sociological theories of institutional order adopted an idealist character from which the dimension of material culture gradually disappeared. Reification was predominantly understood in terms of the constraining, supra-human facticity of institutional relations and processes as it was instantiated and confirmed by the 'misplaced concreteness' of naturalizing definitions and representations. The analysis of fetishism, even though it retained a Marxian (or Freudian) focus on concrete material objects, was also increasingly drawn into this culturalist force field. In a recent reopening of the debate on the politics of materialism, Pietz for example saw fit to criticize the predominantly semiological reading of the Marxist account of fetishism by canonic poststructuralists such as Baudrillard, Derrida, Lacan, Laclau and Žižek, for their tendency to reject any firm distinction between materiality and meaning and to collapse the problem of fetishism with that of ideology. In his view, the gist of the poststructuralist position was effectively to restate the Hegelian

idealist view of material reality as the 'necessary mediating otherness' through which subjective concepts asserted themselves in their process of reflexive historical self-recognition (Pietz, 1993: 119–22, 127). In this sense, it might be argued that much post-Marxist understanding of fetishism has tended to fall back into a kind of pre-Marxist, Feuerbachian critique of the signifier (cf. Debray, 1995).

Pietz's attempt to revive the Marxian focus on the materiality of the fetish fits a broader countermovement to reigning constructivist orthodoxies, which has been gathering force and pace in the past decades to add up to what can now safely be described as a 'materialist turn' in social and cultural theory. It is hardly accidental that much of the theoretical inspiration and many analytical tools for these new approaches to material culture originated with social anthropology, which could rely on an unbroken tradition in the empirical consideration of the sociality of the material world (Douglas, 1984; Douglas and Isherwood, 1996; Thompson, 1979; Miller, 1987; Thomas, 1991; Carrier, 1995). In particular, Appadurai's agenda-setting essay on the politics of commodity exchange and Kopytoff's analysis of the cultural biography of objects, both from *The Social Life of Things* (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986), were important attempts to refocus analytical attention upon the material embodiment and concrete historicity of social objects themselves and indeed to reassert that commodities, like persons, had 'social lives'. While conceding that material things did not acquire meanings 'apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with', it was rather more imperative now 'to follow the things themselves' in order to ascertain how such meanings were actually inscribed in their forms, uses, and trajectories. Countering the tendency to excessively sociologize material transactions, no social analysis of things could therefore avoid a minimum level of 'methodological fetishism' (Appadurai, 1986: 5).

In this respect, the 'anthropological' trope of fetishism generally offered a more accessible channel for rehabilitating the idea of the material embeddedness of culture than that of reification, which to a larger extent remained imprisoned in the subjectivist and representational programme of critical social theory (cf. Lukács's 1967 self-critique, 1971). Accordingly, anthropological and psychoanalytical studies of 'primitive' belief systems and of the fetishization of desire provided important templates for the 'reinvention' of the material in the new cultural studies of consumer and media culture, of visual imagery and the aesthetics of design, of geographies of space, and of science and technology which began to invade the intellectual and disciplinary landscape from the early 1970s (cf. Hall et al., 1980; Miller, 1987; Thrift, 1996). Borrowing the empirical flair of ethnography and its habits of 'thick description', these new studies of material and technological culture indeed began to 'follow the things themselves'; and by doing so, gradually reopened the question of the material constitution and technical equipment of different forms of social order. While beginning to retrace and redress the balance between idealism and materialism in this

fashion, these studies simultaneously guzzled a sufficient dose of ethno-graphic descriptivism and ontological relativism in order to shift from a normative approach to fetishism and reification towards a non-judgmental or a-critical position which increasingly dismissed the Marxian problem of 'false consciousness' as an irrelevant concern. In this sense the materialist turn was simultaneously an 'agnostic turn' which hit on a new social ontology precisely as a result of its empirical resolve to turn 'to the things them-selves'.

Appadurai's decision to follow the social and political life of things was matched in the emerging social studies of technology by similar injunc-tions, most visibly articulated by Winner (1986), to counter overly socio-logical and contextual theories of technological determination and pay closer attention to the ways in which political qualities and purposes became 'fixed' in the material design and physical dimensions of technical artefacts themselves. Repeating Appadurai's flirtation with methodological fetishism, Winner defended the apparent ontological transgression involved in identifying technologies as political phenomena 'in their own right' and in talking about an inherent 'politics of things', even though conventional intuitions might see this as 'a way of mystifying human artifice' and of avoiding the true human sources of justice and injustice (Winner, 1986: 26). If material designs represented crystallized choices between various possi-bilities of realization, particular forms of politics could be 'scripted into' artefacts (cf. Akrich, 1992) and act back independently upon their users. Against this background, it is perhaps less remarkable that more radical approaches to the material constitution of social life simultaneously deepened this emerging ontological 'confusion' between human activity and the performativity of things, and further delegitimized the normative humanist impulse so as to seemingly sever all critical relations between reification, fetishism and alienation.

Working in the 'idealist' tradition of sociological institutional analysis, Thomason has, for example, suggested that instead of 'curable' distortions, reifications should perhaps be regarded as necessary and inevitable prerequisites for any social order (1982: 7). New materialist approaches to fetishism in anthropological, feminist, psychological, and cultural studies have similarly distanced themselves from the derogatory reflex of traditional ideology–critical accounts (cf. Strathern, 1995; Spyer, 1998; Pels, 1998; Mercer, 1994; McClintock, 1993, 1995). Within the emerging tradition of science and technology studies, this agnostic and non-denunciatory approach has been most clearly articulated by Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1993a, 1993b; Law, 1991, 1999). Theorems such as that of the ontological symmetry between human and nonhuman actants, the hybrid character of socio-technical collectives (as also in Foucault's reading of the technologies of discipline and surveillance, 1977), assemblies of 'heterogenous engineering', and the 'interobjectivity' of social order, deliberately set out to confuse the modernist categorizations which princi-pally separated culture from nature and society from technology, revaluing

'things' as active mediators, 'fixers' and stabilizers of social, cultural and political networks. In the ANT view, the ethnographic injunction to closely 'follow the actants' revealed a practice of intimate hybridization between humans and artefacts, which suggested that social networks are unable to cohere without the delegated intentionality and agency of things (see also Haraway, 1991). 'Merely' social structures and symbolic representations are not solid enough to frame durable interactions and hold social reality in place; wherever interactions have a temporal and spatial extension, it is caused by sharing human sociality with nonhumans (Latour, 1996a: 239; 1994: 51, 54). Rather than considering things as idols, which function as projection screens for inverted human beliefs, intentions, and desires, the acknowledgement of this moral and political agency of things leads one to abandon the critical, anti-fetishist reflex and to accept that material reification or fetishization is precisely what holds the social order in place and allows it to move at the same time (Latour, 1993a, 1996b, 1999).

Symbolic and Material Orders

This brief tracking of the discourses of reification and fetishism yields useful parameters for an introductory framing of the contributions to this issue. The first axis of controversy is generated by conceptual residues of the traditional tug-of-war between idealism and materialism, which has by no means been dissolved or laid to rest, but continues to infiltrate recent redescriptions of the web of sociality/materiality. The concern is of course how much autonomy and agency can be granted to material objects in view of their social inscription and symbolic construction, and how far conceptual experiments with the ontological symmetry between humans and nonhumans may take us and/or should be permitted to go. The second main axis of debate concerns the fate of critical theory and of ethico-political sensibility in the face of heightened uncertainties about the distinction between what is real, what is constructed, and what is imaginary, and between what may count as a person and what as a thing.

The first section starts out with two contributions which usefully recall the two contrasting but also overlapping sides of the argument: the symbolic framing of material objects (Harré) vs the material framing of social relations (Pietz). The two following contributions rise to the radical challenge which is posed by the 'levelling' and a-critical ontology of ANT, in arguing for a stronger essentialist (Vandenberghe) or a weaker performativist (Pels) priority of the realm of symbolic practice and sociality over that of material objectivity. The next section switches more clearly towards the performativity of objects and the politics of things themselves, emphasizing their topological multiplicity and the precarious nature of their ontological stabilization. It lays out alternative and multiple spatial ontologies which step beyond the Euclidean modernist grid in order to explore the fluidity and virtuality of objects (Law, van Loon), the performative construction of space by dwelling and movement (Turnbull), and the co-production of material space and national community (Verstraete). The third section extends these

routes, which are already leading beyond the idealism/materialism binary, into new conceptual territories at the centre of which is a reconsideration of the issue of mediation: from a concern with the mediation of the screen in the making of the subjectiviy of the market trader (Knorr Cetina and Brügger); the mediation of the hand within what we understand as the scopic of the museum (Hetherington); the mediation of food within the ethics of care (Harbers, Mol and Stollmeyer); the mediation of the commodity in the regime of the (pornographic) gift (Slater); and the mediation of technology in the making of what it is to be human (Latour). One emphasis which is marked throughout this collection of articles is a switch in conceptions of performativity and performance from a predominantly discursive towards a more practice-oriented view which focuses upon bodily encounters with and attachments to objects and spaces (cf. Schieffelin, 1998). Another major theme which is addressed throughout this issue is the imagination of new forms of ontological politics and of a new ethics of alterity on the basis of this new intimacy between sociality and materiality.

  As indicated, the first set of articles follow a 'tacking' movement around the issue of the relative weight of symbolic vs material structures and that of the relative agency of people and things. In the opening article, Rom Harré strongly argues the priority of symbolic, especially discursive, action over the material order in the genesis of social things. What turns a piece of stuff into a social object is its embedment in a narrative construction. The attribution of an active or a passive role to things in relation to persons is thus essentially story-relative: nothing happens or exists in the social world unless it is framed by human performative activity. Drawing on Gibson's notion of 'affordance', Harré affirms that material things may be disposed towards many different usages, and may acquire multiple identities according to different narrative constructions, even though the range of their possible 'existences' is constrained by certain material features. In this sense, the materiality of an object is perhaps nothing but 'the totality of its affordances'. Objects acquire their full significance only if one takes account of their double role in both the 'practical' order, which includes social arrangements for maintaining life, and the 'expressive' order, which creates hierarchies of honour and status, and which enjoys priority over the former. Reasoning from a microsociological constructionist perspective, Harré restates his view that there is nothing else to social life but symbolic exchanges and joint management of meaning, including the meaning of things; the illusion that some *thing* is real is merely an effect of certain interpretational grammars which remain stable across the generations or even the centuries.

  If Harré emphasizes that things become social objects only within particular storylines, William Pietz makes the reverse point about the essential materiality of social relationships, especially contractual ones, e.g. as expressed in the legal history of the 'material consideration'. Departing from a similar conception of the performative micro-reproduction of social order and the communicative objectification of social facts, he nevertheless

attempts to balance what is described as the 'immaterialist' Enlightenment view of social contract by focusing upon the role of forensic legal objects within the capitalist economy. A 'material consideration' refers to an obscure but important social object that embodies the power to transform subjective promises into objective obligations and thereby establishes the social fact of legal liability. The legal doctrine of consideration implies that verbal promises or 'moral' considerations do not suffice to establish a contractual relationship between individuals, but require the simultaneous transfer of a tangible object in order to institute a legally binding social fact. By thus providing objective physical evidence for the obligation, materiality is clearly a condition for sociality. This idea of social materiality cannot easily be articulated in modern social theory as long as it sustains a strict separation between society and nature or between human subjectivity and physical causality, and therefore tends to explain social objects such as contracts as expressions of subjective intention, without noticing the material component which lends them their binding force. If social fact-making is purely seen in symbolic terms rather than as real enactments of social power, the social causality of things like material considerations effectively becomes a mystery.

The following article by Frédéric Vandenberghe tacks back towards the idealist side of the argument, in a spirited defence of critical humanism against the radical symmetry of ANT. Compared to Harré and Pietz, he also takes a much stronger stance on sociological realism, arguing that the critique of reification and the ethics of emancipation require us to go beyond the 'flat ontology' of ANT and its intermediate level of sociotechnical networks towards a more stratified view of social reality which is able to account for the determining effect of broader generative but invisible structures of domination. Drawing on Husserlian phenomenology, he reasserts the categorical distinction between the ontological regions inhabited by humans and nonhumans, and develops a critical opposition between the gift economy, which emphasizes qualitative relations of reciprocity between humans and which tends towards the personalization of things, and the commodity economy, which objectifies things as property, promotes the reification of persons, and turns them into strategically operating 'humants'. By restoring the primacy of the relationship among humans over that between nonhumans, gifts symbolize and perform the social bond; while commodity fetishism severs that bond and inverts this 'essential' relationship. This Marxian model is critically applied to ANT by suggesting that its 'fetishist' attribution of social power to nonhumans effectively results from a failure to account for the emergent properties of the broader relational and cultural systems in which they are embedded, and which over-determine the blackboxed object worlds which ANT has described. Breaking this fetishist illusion calls for a utopian and communicative reconfiguration of semiotics which turns back the materialist turn and restores the emancipatory interest of giving voice to human voices which are repressed by the world of things.

In the following article, Dick Pels reverses tack again by supporting Harré's nominalist view about the reflexive performance of social reality and materiality against the sociological realism which is defended by Vandenberghe. The challenge posed by ANT's principle of radical symmetry is here taken up in a different way, by developing a counterargument to the Latourian (ethnomethodological) presumption that social and symbolic constructions are in themselves too fragile and weak to effectively knit together the social order – which needs ballasting by a myriad of techno-logical objects. Refocusing the Durkheimian problem of the resilient 'thing-ness' or 'stickiness' of the social, it is argued that social orders are also maintained by self-fulfilling prophecies which are stabilized by the reality effect of what is called 'everyday essentialism'. Social facts are routinely enacted by circular bootstrapping operations which are often misrecognized as such in order to produce an illusion of ontological transcendence: what Pels calls the 'Münchhausen effect'. It is this practical everyday reification of social facts which also creates fixities, nodes, and sites for the symbolic 'packaging' of material objects. Over against ANT's agnostic appreciation of this reifying practice as 'something we all do', Pels, like Vandenberghe, therefore retains an interest in a critical theory of reification. Social facts are implicated in incessant processes of realization and de-realization which enhance or diminish their relative 'existence'; they become thinglike entities because (and insofar as) actors fail to calculate their own perfor-mative contribution to them and continue to treat them as things. This performative circle is only vicious as long as it is not recognized for what it is and cheerfully practised as such. Reflexive circularity emphasizes the normative significance of 'acting-as-if' over against all forms of ontological essentialism: if social situations are more clearly defined 'as if' they are real, we are less likely to be caught out by the stark reality of their consequences.

Performativity, Fluidity, Alterity

Objects need symbolic framings, storylines and human spokespersons in order to acquire social lives; social relationships and practices in turn need to be materially grounded in order to gain temporal and spatial endurance. If the previous section has variously re-emphasized the symbolic side of the sociality/materiality equation, the contributions in the next one return to a more attentive exploration of the object side. On one level, it continues the broad de-reifying programme which was pursued by most of the previous authors, in emphasizing that material objects are not natural facts but are performed in heterogenous ways, as are the networks and spaces which they inhabit and construct. John Law's article begins by restating the classical ANT position that objects do not exist 'in themselves' but are the effect of a performative stabilization of relational networks. Material objects are enactments of strategies, and actively participate in the making and holding together of social relations. In addition, these material enactments inevitably have a spatial dimension; they simultaneously establish spatial conditions for objectual identity, continuity, and difference. Space must not

be reified as a natural, pre-existing container of the social and the material, but is itself a performance. Moreover, there are multiple forms of spatiality beyond the Euclidean space of regions (e.g. networks and fluids), and objects may exist and achieve homeomorphism within several different spatial systems. Like the Portuguese ship, they are able to displace themselves precisely because of their topological complexity, i.e. because they simultaneously exist within regional, network, and more fluid forms of space. Technologies such as the Zimbabwe Bush Pump present a fluid object which is able to exist and cohere without the presence of fixed boundaries or the permanence of a particular functional definition. The network logic, however, which gravitates towards stability and functionality, tends to exclude and silence this spatial Other, even though network realities are constitutively dependent upon fluid work. Law suggests an alternative political ontology is needed which goes beyond the reification of network space in order to give voice to the fluid objects which escape its unidimensional functionality.

In the next article, Joost van Loon takes as his subject a particularly fluid category of objects: viruses. His emphasis is once again upon the performative constitution or 'objectification' of an object whose 'itness' remains virtual and ambiguous. Far from being a simple matter of fact, van Loon argues in classical STS manner (Latour, 1988), viruses only came into being as an accomplishment of a varied set of actors, being rendered intelligible as a result of their successful performative 'enpresenting' by the emerging 'assemblage' of virology. Virological technoscience objectified the virus, which gradually emerged as a nodal point in a new alliance between microbiology, molecular physics and electron microscopy engineering, and on the strength of new techniques of visualization and new forms of discursive signification and cultural valorization. Mainly a gradual process, its emergence during the early 1950s was radical and sudden because only then could the various substrands of virological technoscience establish partial connections with each other and establish the more or less universal intelligibility of the virus as a virtual object. The singularity of the virus as a distinct object disclosed by virology, is therefore a performative closure of multiple possibilities by an ensemble of discursive and practical technologies.

David Turnbull's article mingles perspectives from STS and landscape archeology in order to illuminate the closely related performativity of knowledge and space in readings of ancient monuments such as the Maltese megaliths. Countering modernist linguistic and 'architectural' approaches to the performance of space, he examines how such monuments may be approached as 'theatres of knowledge' which materially embody spatialized narratives of particular human actions. Amid the welter of explanations which have been given of the shape, function, position, and social context of the megaliths, Turnbull prefers a more fluid performative view over traditional representational accounts which privilege the modernist spatiality of the architectural plan and emphasize how material culture 'reflects'

particular forms of society. Conventionally seen as temples, such a view allows for very different interpretations of these structures which recognize multiple and changing functions over time, with accompanying transitions in spatiality and social organization. Neolithic monuments suggest a spatial practice which is different from our own, in which space is created through the movement of bodies through the landscape rather than through carto-graphic inscription/imposition. People perform objects, but especially buildings, by moving through and around them; but these objects also perform people by constraining their movements and by suggesting particu-lar encounters between them and others. Ingold's conception of 'way-finding' as 'feeling your way' through a world which is itself continually constructed by the interaction of human and nonhuman agencies, brings out the differ-ence of this neolithic experience of space, which was intimately related to the ways in which people travelled through and marked the landscape (Ingold, 2000).

If, for Law and Turnbull, otherness is enacted in more fluid and mobile forms of spatiality, Ginette Verstraete's paper considers a major technology of mobility in order to trace how its co-production of national space and national community simultaneously generated the exclusion of specific categories of racialized and gendered others. The construction of America's first transcontinental railroad displays an intriguing intersection of tech-nologies of transportation, representation and dissemination. Narrowly cultural approaches to nationhood still overlook that territorial nation-building is inseparably both a technical project of spatial design and a project of community building which includes the production of racial, gendered and class-related divisions. Verstraete traces how a classic story of heroic white male ingenuity was forged and disseminated with the aid of various rhetorical and visual practices, especially photography. These promotional technologies of nation-wide marketing attempted to contain the contradictions involved in this simultaneous attempt to materially invent a new American subject and to purify it from contact with excluded others (such as Chinese railway labourers, Californio ranchers, and indigenous Indians). A new concept of equal and homogenous citizenship emerged to suggest the image of the nation as a Great American Family which was forged together by iron tracks. Railroad photography reproduced a spectacular land-scape which, purged from the presence of workers, pictured the heroic immensity of railroad structures within a sublime natural scenery as an all-American white male achievement, reaffirming divisions between working immigrants and travelling citizens, female nature and male technology, and the culture of leisure and that of work. In this fashion, mobility and location, difference and identity, particularity and universality were intricately inter-twined in the technological production of America's mobile nation.

Living With Things

As we have seen above, one fundamental intuition of the theory of commodity fetishism was that what was reified in material commodities was

basically human practical activity. This category of practice or work (what the young Marx described as 'practical sensuous activity') may offer a possible starting point for developing a more material conception of performativity which tendentially distances itself from rationalist discursive models to shift closer to emotional, corporeal modes of experience which emphasize a more immediate 'libidinal' apprehension of both persons and things. Some of this direction is indicated by Pietz's view of fetishism as the intense experience of an individual's living self through its impassioned response to the fetish object (1985: 12–13). Such a 'practical turn' (cf. Schatzki et al., 2001), which encloses material things not so much within definitions or textual narratives but within practical, bodily handlings and performances, may offer a promising way out of some of the dilemmas which still incapacitate debates around the interaction between sociality and materiality. As a reinvigorated tradition in the sociology of the body has variously pointed out, the sensuous materiality of the human body may identify the 'missing link' and act as the most proximate ontological mediator between discursive idealism and the 'naked' materialism of the 'things themselves' (Shilling, 1993; Burkitt, 1999; Crossley, 2001), suggesting an interactive complex in which bodily *intuitions* of the situation simultaneously centre particular 'sensations' of the social (cf. Shilling, 1997) and particular attachments to material things. In this manner, a more practical ontology of 'living with things' may be able to rework the mediating link between the performances of persons and the performativity of objects which has emerged as the core issue of the present collection of articles.

Bits and pieces of this view have already intermittently popped up in some of the contributions summarized above. Van Loon for example referred to the assemblage of virological technoscience as simultaneously including a regime of signs and a practice of handling objects. Verstraete suggested how the sensuous spectacle of railway bridges, tunnels, and viaducts within the setting of amazing natural landscapes, as represented through promotional photography, was meant to generate feelings of proud attachment to the spectacular unity of the American family-nation. Turnbull most explicitly advocated a move from a linguistic-discursive view of performativity towards notions about 'thinking through the body' and 'feeling your way', tracing how spaces were structured and cognitively mapped by people's practical dwellings and movements. In this way the articles in the third and final section are particularly concerned with the materiality of mediation that is constitutive of 'embodied' subject-objects. It becomes clear that this materiality also implies an ethics of relations, of care and of technological folding.

In this light, Karin Knorr Cetina and Urs Brügger consider the construction of wants and the embodying of the market in the work routines of workers on the Swiss foreign exchange market. They are concerned, in particular, with the role of the computer screen within the establishment of post-social relations around a sense of embodied lack. The screen does not provide access to the market but *is* the market as an exteriorized assemblage

of practices brought together in one place. The screen is the (ontologically liquid) market rather than its representation into which traders immerse themselves. Traders engage with this market in their daily work practices through a constructed sense of lack that requires them to act passionately within the market in order to satisfy the self understood as a structure of wanting. While Knorr Cetina and Brügger draw on a Lacanian understanding of the self as lack, rather than focus on the formation of direct human social relations around this issue, they look instead at the materiality of lack and its position within the post-social relations constituted through trading on-line in the foreign exchange market. Desire is constituted and realized here through the object of the computer screen rather than with other people directly. In this way relations between persons are mediated by real objects that constitute persons virtually.

Kevin Hetherington's article looks at a quite different form of mediation, a tactile book on the Parthenon Frieze for the visually impaired that has recently been produced by the British Museum. As a material expression of the current concern with equal opportunities and access within the museum sector, this book attempts to provide a form of access through an artefact to another set of artefacts (the sculptures themselves) for a group of people on the margins of the museum's visual space. Conscious of the conservational problems of allowing objects to be touched directly, the book provides an optical prosthesis that allows the hand to extend into an otherwise visual space. But as a form of mediation the book reproduces the representational codes of Enlightenment scopics, in which the viewpoint is reduced to the optics of the subject. In contrast, Hetherington argues that the body of the visually impaired person, notably the hand, offers another and quite different form of mediation in which the body, through its haptic capacities, comes to challenge (stop) this correspondence between the optic and the scopic. Associating instead the haptic with the scopic opens up the possibility with a new form of connection with the sign's materiality and performativity.

If Hetherington's concern is with the 'view from the fingertips', the paper by Hans Harbers, Annemarie Mol and Alice Stollmeyer addresses the 'taste' of ethics. Through a study of the eating practices of patients with dementia in institutional settings, the authors open up for consideration the issue of the materiality of care in the aporial space that exists between established ethical discourses of will and medical discourses of natural death. One of the symptoms of dementia diseases like Alzheimer's is a loss of appetite amongst sufferers. The question of whether patients should be force-fed to stop them dying and whether not doing so might be construed as an act of unlawful killing has led to public debates in Holland that centre on these two discourses. Dementia challenges the category of will as volitional act. In the ethical discourse it has tended to be dealt with by broadening the category of will from conscious acts to include physical embodied expressions in order to address the issue of food refusal. In the second discourse, the refusal of food is seen instead as a part of the nature of the

disease itself, and of the disease acting within the body. In both discourses the issue of care is left out. In the context of feeding both discourses are premised solely on the issue of the need for food rather than care that it can express. Care is relational and material. As the article shows, food can become the medium of care: that of nurses for their patients or relatives for their dying loved ones. Food is analysed here as an example of the materiality of care that is not captured by either of the established discourses surrounding the treatment of dementia patients. Food's texture, smell and its taste provide a source of pleasure as much as nourishment. The authors use the trope of the taste of chocolate as exemplary of the pleasure that food can bring. That taste is seen as a mediation of care – the care of the son for his mother and of the nurses who provide the chocolate when he cannot be there. Attention to the materiality of care refocuses the subordination of eating to acts of will or the progress of a disease and readdresses attention onto the mediation of relations of care and the practices of living with disease and to broader ethical concerns with living and dying.

Don Slater's article, concerned with the trading relations surrounding sexually explicit material over Internet Relay Chat (IRC), connects back to the papers by Vandenberghe, Knorr Cetina and Brügger and van Loon as well as further addressing this issue of the materiality of the ethics of mediation. The trading relation in this field is one expressed through notions of exchange where no money changes hands. In this virtual market, people interact with one another around the idea of swapping (sexual) images with each other that they have on their own computers. Networks of contacts are constituted, forms of deviant sexuality policed, and a sense of reciprocity established around this trade. When such trading relations develop they can often lead on to other forms of interaction, from email and letter writing outside the channels of the IRC to meetings and sexual encounters outside of the virtual world altogether. There are similarities here with Knorr Cetina and Brügger's arguments about the constitution of post-social relations and the subject as lack through the screen (it appears that the people in this virtual arena can never have enough porn). Likewise Slater also addresses the question of the objectification of the immaterial (virtual object/image) that concerns van Loon too. In addition to the materiality of the computer systems and the embodied viewers there is the less certain material status of the image itself that can be seen as an image on a screen, downloaded as bytes to a disk or printed onto paper. But the key issue for Slater is the way in which such unstable materialities are inserted into ethical practices of establishing a normative order of exchange. In contrast to the distinction between gift and commodity exchange (as defended, for example, by Vandenberghe) Slater shows how gifts of images where no money changes hands are established through the rules of commodity exchange. In order to sustain an ethical sense of reciprocity and trade an economic model is deployed within a gift arena. Stable social relations of exchange are made through the mediation of an unstable form of materiality and through a blurring of the boundaries between the gift and the commodity.

Bruno Latour's article is also concerned with the question of the materiality and ethics of mediation but in a much broader way. Taking us into his garden shed and watching him hammer something at his bench he asks us to consider the moral dimension of objects such as the hammer. The central question in this article is not simply 'how can an object be moral?' but to redirect that question in order to ask 'what is it to be human?' Latour's answer is that we should overcome the dualism between the human and the object through a novel understanding of technical action. In contrast to the idea that technologies are concerned with means (mastery) and moralities with ends, Latour entangles the distinction between means and ends in the notion of technology. Technology is contained in the use of an object that is itself inserted into a fold in time that connects the use of an object today with its making years ago, with a design that stretches back for centuries and to a hominid tool principle that is two million years prior to the 'human'. Rather than a form of mastery (and therefore a problem, see Heidegger, 1977), technology is considered instead as a relation with alterity that is folded within 'garlands of time' through which we relate to the Other. Technology for Latour is a form of mediation that allows us to express a being through a relation with the other. Humans do not just use technologies but are themselves mediated by them. Through this idea of mediation as a material relation an ontological dignity is given back to the human. Rather than the humanist way of treating the human as the measure of all things, the human becomes here something constituted of and for other things. Through this sense of technology, Latour offers a way for ANT to reconnect with critical questions of otherness, objectification and alienation which have up until now been missing from this theoretical approach.

The issue closes with an afterword, in which Steve Woolgar critically interrogates the argumentative dynamics which are organized around the duality between the social and the material. Reinforcing the point that material objects need (social) interpretations, stories, and spokespersons, Woolgar claims that the very idea of a duality is a 'conceptual bubble that needs and deserves bursting'. The complex crossover effects between the virtual and the real in electronic technologies ('the more virtual the more real') are cited in order to suggest that the entanglement between the social and the material might likewise be viewed as a mutually stimulating one rather than as a zero sum game which invites analyses in terms of 'pendulum swings' or 'co-construction': 'the more material the more social'.

In this way, the present issue highlights new mediations and entanglements of sociality and materiality which also suggest new forms of ontological politics and a new ethics of alterity. If, as Latour insists, technical mediation is the mode of the detour, of the unexpected sideways move, rather than that of mere instrumentality; and if ethical mediation too is a way of slowing down, preventing ends from turning too readily into means, both morality and technology are explorations of alterity which are out to proliferate mediations rather than to close them down. If sociality is incessantly folded into the materiality of things, a politics of things will be

interested in doggedly maintaining the reversibility of these technological reifications. Human bodies and the artefacts they are attached to form an intricate tangle of performances, mediations and techniques which no longer support traditional critical distinctions between the social and the material world. But this does not reduce the critical (political) task of keeping fluid the many fixtures and reifications which these performances, mediations, and techniques necessarily engender.

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