

What is the role of things in political participation? This inventive book offers a fresh perspective on everyday forms of engagement, one that foregrounds the role of objects, technology and settings in relation to public involvement. It makes a distinctive contribution to debates about the material dimension of democracy, proposing that we must attend more closely to the settings in which things acquire the power to engage. It develops this argument through a series of case studies of contemporary devices of participation, such as smart electricity meters, demonstrational eco-homes and sustainable living gadgets. This book then offers a novel approach to the analysis of specifically material forms of participation. *Material Participation* explores the next steps that might be taken in social studies of engagement, technology and the environment, focusing our critical and creative attention squarely on the materials and devices of the public.

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Technology, the Environment and Everyday Publics



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these studies have been able to make an important critical contribution. However, in doing so, they have also tended to uphold participation and democracy as theoretical ideals, while leaving these ideals themselves relatively un-interrogated. In this book, I have tried to open up for questioning this 'asymmetrical' treatment of technology and democracy in social studies of technology, by outlining an empirical approach that foregrounds the role of devices in participation. Such an approach views participation as a performative accomplishment, which involves the codification of practices in ideal terms, such as 'involvement made easy'. Case studies of specific technologies of participation can help to bring such codifications into view. This also means that there is a close connection between the project of 'devising' participation – of adding technology to our account of it – and that of 'empiricising' it – of turning to practice as the site where the ontology of participation becomes specified.

One thing that I hope this book makes clear is that to adopt an empirical approach to participation does *not* mean that our job as analysts is reduced to merely describing it. Technologies of participation, like most other instruments, are under-determined in their application, to use the classic Wittgensteinian formulation. To use a more contemporary term, these technologies are marked by performative flexibility. As we saw in the case of everyday carbon accounting and ecoshow-homes, a given device may be adapted to perform participation in radically different registers, from 'involvement made easy' to creative experiments in living differently. This is why we must adopt a performative perspective on these instruments: only by considering their deployment in specific settings, can we determine what is the normative range of different devices of engagement. Do devices of everyday carbon accounting reduce the contribution of citizens to a competitive game where the point is to find out who has the most 'points'? Or do these devices enable an activist engagement with climate change mitigation? This is a relatively open question. As we saw in Chapter 3, the Islington–Hackney Carbon Rationing Action Group was able to identify crucial weaknesses of governmental programmes of carbon trading, precisely because it had made this very format of environmental action its own. The democratic politics of technology here becomes, in part, a question of who appropriates whom.

Devices may also open up new ways of imagining material participation. To make this clear, I would like to discuss one last technology of environmental participation: Spiral Drawing Sunrise (see Figure 6.4). This experimental device was built by the Amsterdam-based new media artist,



Figure 6.4 Spiral Drawing Sunrise, Esther Polak, Amsterdam, 6 April 2009

Esther Polak. It is a kind of sundial on wheels, or a sun-powered, mobile hour glass, which can be used to make recordings of the rising sun. The device is suggestive of a particular mode of environmental participation, I would like to propose, one that focuses on the rendering of the environment as a 'happening' (Marres, 2012). Using the Spiral robot-cart to record a sunrise on a public square in Amsterdam, Spiral Drawing Sunrise turned out to render its surroundings 'present' in a particular way. As the robot-cart made its slow circles across the square, it highlighted not only the path of the sun, but also the trams crossing the square, women walking their dogs and the unmovable dark glass building in the corner of the square that houses the Dutch National Bank.

In doing so, Spiral Drawing Sunrise suggested a mode of environmental awareness that is reminiscent of sustainable living experiments. By modifying the everyday environment of the square, it accentuated the various trajectories that composed this environment, from trams to the sun, cyclists, and passers-by, making them stand out far more strongly than they would if you would cross the square routinely (as I did for many years). As such, Spiral Drawing Sunrise too raised the question I flagged above: What is it possible to make relevant?²⁵ To be sure, this question does not give us a model of participation, and it surely does not count as a solution to the predicament of environmental participation: it does not tell us how the mutual relevance of issues, actors and spaces of participation can be ensured. But, in invoking this predicament, Spiral Drawing Sunrise, like other devices in this book,

does provide a way of articulating, and indeed dramatizing, the public's problem of relevance.

Some interpreters of pragmatism, like Richard Rorty, have suggested that to empiricise a problem is to deflate it. For Rorty, to understand classic philosophical problems as specific to a particular epoch or context is to witness their collapse, or even, to provide a way of making them disappear. ANT, too, has offered a version of this idea, as it suggested that to turn attention to heterogeneous networks in-the-making is to suspend certain classic problems of philosophy and sociology, like the famous 'gap' between subject and object, and that between individual agency and social structure. This belief in the power of history or the empirical to deflate philosophy's problems, it seems to me, involves a misreading of the pragmatist project: it mistakes the project of *re-constructing* the problems of philosophy as practical problems for a critical or deflationary one. But there are also other modes of empiricising concepts, which examine how weighty problems of knowledge, politics, and the real acquire their significance in specific settings. This is how I have approached the distinctive problems of the material public in this book: the problems of its influencability, instability, un-doability. These problems of participation are challenges of practice as much as theory, and our role as analysts should be to show that they deserve to be taken seriously as problems, and to prevent them from turning into excuses for not taking seriously the normative predicaments of material publics.