What does a More-than-Human Leviathan look like?

Looking from within the broad socio-cultural condition often referenced to as “network culture”, across the new geographies of networked public spheres, and in the use of urban social spaces, a culture of participation, performed through (often mediated) acts of augmentation, collaboration, confrontation and appropriation, has already challenged not only the dominant visions of future cities and the customary technocratic approaches to smart city technologies, but also the traditional role of public space, the disciplinary methods of urban design, and forces us to face larger issues about decision-making, governance, and, ultimately, democracy. Such culture of participation emerges through experiments with the unstable relations between some socio-cultural aspects of the network society, inertial practices in public spaces, contemporary models of democracy, and their spatial presence. It is influenced by socio-technical artefacts, social and technical networks and related practices. Moreover, it increasingly concerns elements situated beyond the human, including natural resources and aspects of ecological ethics. One of the possible examples, which is presented in this text, is the wave of demonstrations and civil unrest that began in Turkey on 28 May 2013, initially to contest the urban development plan for Istanbul’s Gezi Park, and specifically the cutting down of the park’s trees.

Publics and Public Activity

The literatures on publics and the emergence of public activity space can help us frame the question of what an integrated more than human public space and way of scrutinising public space might be. Public life – and in particular political life – as Hannah Arendt has described it, pretends careful attention to geographical and spatial considerations, to the virtues of particularity. The “space of appearance”, a term derived from the philosopher’s “The Human Condition”¹, corresponds to the polis, to that space


“where I appear to others as others appear to me.” Such public space of appearance can always be recreated anew wherever individuals gather together politically, that is, “wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action” (1958, 198–9). However, since it is a creation of action, this space of appearance is highly fragile and exists only when actualised through the performance of deeds or the utterance of words. Its peculiarity, as Arendt says, is that “unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears […] with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever” (1958, 199). The space of appearance must be continually recreated by action; its existence is secured whenever actors gather together for the purpose of discussing and deliberating about matters of public concern, and it disappears the moment these activities cease. It is always a potential space that finds its actualisation in the actions and speeches of individuals who have come together to undertake some common project. It may arise suddenly, as in the case of revolutions, or it may develop slowly out of prolonged change. Historically, it has been recreated whenever public spaces of action and deliberation have been set up, from town hall meetings to workers’ councils, from demonstrations and sit-ins to struggles for justice and equal rights.

The question of how a public is constituted is also central to John Dewey’s interests. For Dewey, the philosophical investigation of the public cannot be divorced from the “facts”—concrete situations, experiences, and the materiality of everyday life. Invoking Dewey, Latour and Weibel asked the question: “How are things made public?”, with the complimentary “How are publics made with things?” remaining unaddressed. As Bruno Latour puts it: “we don’t assemble because we agree, look alike, feel good, are socially compatible or wish to fuse together but because we are brought by divisive matters of concern into some place in order to come to some sort of provisional makeshift (dis)agreement”. To assemble is one thing – to represent to the eyes and ears of those assembled what is at stake is another. Here, art and design have to play a central role.

Two Optical Constructions of a Leviathan

Hobbes’ design of his icon of the state, the Leviathan, has its many bodies visibly combined into one. He sought to embody an artificial person which could make many into one. “A multitude of men are made one person when they are by one man or one person represented, so that it be done with the consent of everyone of the multitude in particular.” When Thomas Hobbes instructed his engraver on how to sketch the famous frontispiece for Leviathan, he had his mind full of optical metaphors and illusion machines he had seen in his travels through Europe. But in addition to the visual puzzle of assembling composite bodies, we can also notice that they are thick with things: clothes, a huge sword, immense castles, large cultivated fields, crowns, ships, cities and an immensely complex technology of gathering, meeting, cohabiting, enlarging, reducing and focusing. In addition to the throng of little people summed up in the crowned head of the Leviathan,

---


there are objects everywhere.⁴

Westerners have learned to play the role of “subject,” in part from painting, and various representation techniques. The modern tradition insists that there is a real difference between a spectator and a scene – hence the idea that the material world is the outside world. Such a view makes it very difficult to register how we experience our connections to nature, things and each other.

A sequence of images taken from the exhibition “Reset Modernity!”, curated by Bruno Latour, Martin Guinard-Terrin, Christophe Leclercq and Donato Ricci at ZKM in 2016 (and designed by Critical Media Lab and myself), shows a crucial transition: from the staging of the modern model of knowledge production, which placed the subject and the object at two opposite ends with the screen of representation to separate and mediate between them, to the condition of the fieldwork, in which the subject inhabits the same space as the object of their inquiry, to the multi-perspective, shifting, elusive performance of a more-than-human gaze in Vernena Paravel’s and Lucien Castaing-Taylor’s film Leviathan.

An artist in a scientific office stares at a mummified right arm while completing an anatomical drawing. A virtual plane between the two separates the artist from his “model”. Adrian Walker sits facing the object, while the archeologist Anthony Graesch is engrossed

in extracting it from the ground with the help of Riley Lewis, a member of the Stolo tribe whose abandoned habitat is being excavated. The authors describe their practice as “sensory ethnography.” In Paravel’s and Castaing-Taylor’s Leviathan, the authors follow a vessel off the coast of New Bedford, Massachusetts. A multitude of cameras record various “actors” on the boat and in the area surrounding it. The point of view shifts from that of the sailors to the bird, to the fish, or the machinery. In a continuous flow, the overall recording results in an immersive and kaleidoscopic experience. The issue is not to obtain a more totalizing view, but to explore whether one can ignore the frame altogether and literally move “sideways,” instead of keeping with the traditional face-to-face of object and subject, and to move, literally, with the flow.\(^5\)

\(^5\) cfr. Latour, Bruno. 2016. Reset Modernity! Field Book. ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe
The protests at Gezi Park through the lenses of geolocated content and social media users

Within Urban Sensing, a EU-funded project I co-wrote and worked on from 2012 to 2015, an experiment led by the design agency LUST provided a tentative representation of the emerging constituency, a “Leviathan” optically refracted through social media and the space of the city.

On the morning of 28 May 2013, around 50 environmentalists are camping out in Gezi Park, Istanbul, in order to prevent its demolition. The protesters initially halt attempts to bulldoze the park by refusing to leave. Police use tear gas to disperse the peaceful protesters and burn down their tents in order to allow the bulldozing to continue. The day after, the size of the protest grows exponentially, with online activists calling for support against the severe police crackdown (2013 Protests in Turkey). On June 4, a solidarity group associated with the Occupy Gezi movement, Taksim Solidarity, issued on the Web several demands: the preservation of the park; an end to police violence; the right to freedom of assembly; the end of the sale of public spaces, beaches, waters, forests, streams, parks and urban symbols to private companies large holdings and investors; the right of people to express their needs and complaints; a discussion about the third airport in Istanbul, the third bridge over the Bosforus, the construction on Ataturk Forest Farm, and the hydro-electric power plants (Taksim Solidarity Press Release, 2013).

The wave of demonstrations and civil unrest sparked initially to contest the urban development plan for Istanbul’s Gezi Park, and the cutting down of the park’s trees, but influential in the public sensitivity for protecting Gezi Park, were also the large number of trees that were cut in the forests of northern Istanbul for the construction of the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge (Third Bosphorus Bridge) and the new Recep Tayyip Erdoğan International Airport. According to official Turkish government data, a total of 2,330,012 trees have been cut for constructing the Erdoğan Airport and its road connections; and a total of 381,096 trees have been cut for constructing the highway connections of the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge; reaching an overall total of 2,711,108 trees for the two projects. Major protests were sparked by outrage at the violent eviction of a sit-in at the park protesting the plan. Subsequently, supporting protests and strikes took place across Turkey, protesting a wide range of concerns at the core of which were issues of freedom of the press, of expression, assembly, and the government's encroachment on Turkey's secularism. With no centralised leadership beyond the small assembly that organised the original environmental protest, social media played a key part in the protests, not least because much of the Turkish media downplayed the protests, particularly in the early stages, but because they helped choreograph the presence and the appearance of the protesters in the city public spaces.

---


These two maps – partial, as every map - are both global perception maps and maps of individual experiences in Istanbul, during the 2013 protests. They are automatically produced by digital technologies and represent occurrences, events and situations, rather than objects, arrangements and organisations: something that happens rather than something that is following traditional ontological categories. They are between the scale of the city and that of the individual. They visualise the spatial distribution of geolocated content shared on social media by common people in Istanbul during a huge political protest, sparked by shared affection for public space, its trees and parks, then scaled enormously to challenge the current political regime. How can traditional planning and design react when confronted with urban publics that while easily plotted still remain somewhat unpredictable? The affection of urban space and the affordances of the networked public sphere certainly do have a role, beyond both functionality and spectacularisation.

Conclusion

The two Leviathan’s and the maps produced in Istanbul are starting points for a discussion about forming and representing more than human public life, where humans are not alone and the nonhumans who effectively populate it take a more prominent role. Moreover, they attempt to overcome the distinction between an observer and what is observed. When we split the stage at the plane of representation, what is behind takes on the appearance of an object, while what is in front of the will be defined as the observer. Used to looking at paintings in museums, maps on paper, videos on screens, despite this being counterintuitive, we end up thinking that the world is always seen through a window pane. We transfer this frame onto everything we see, we learn to distance ourselves from the outside world – especially when what we look at depicts catastrophes. Participatory art practices and design can contribute by helping take one step away from the “naturalistic” representation of a subject facing an object, and presenting instead a more complex picture, crowded with humans and nonhumans alike, the technologies that afford us new social practices as well as the things that concern us all.

Short biography

Currently I am Associate Reader “Places and Traces” at the Design Academy Eindhoven. In 2017/18, I was an artist-in-residence at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. I collaborated from 2016 to 2018 with the Programme d’Expérimentation en Arts Politiques (SPEAP) at Sciences Po (Paris). In 2017 I taught “Research Methods in Design” and “Collective Works” at The New School’s Parsons Paris. In 2016, I was part of the design research team of Reset Modernity!, an exhibition co-curated by Bruno Latour at ZKM (Karlsruhe), and of New Europeans, the arts and design programme of the Netherlands presidency of the Council of the EU (Amsterdam). I obtained a PhD in Architectural and Urban Design from Politecnico di Milano in 2015.

I am a contributor to Work, Body, Leisure, the Dutch Pavilion at the 16th Venice International Architecture Biennale. Other projects have been exhibited internationally. I contributed articles on journals and magazines, including Design Issues, Visual Studies, Space Emotion and Society; I have hosted workshops including at ZKM, Strelka Institute, Transmediale, SALT institute, z33.