

In the Dome of the Parliament of Things: Media Art's Engagement with Bruno Latour (with Peter Sloterdijk as best man)

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In a recent keynote address to the assembled "Design History Society" in Cornwall --home to "The Eden Project's" spectacular geodesic domes- Bruno Latour (2008) discussed the connections between his project and that of Peter Sloterdijk, the German philosopher and rector of the ZKM (Centre For Media Art) in Karlsruhe. Sloterdijk considers politics as a matter of arranging and assembling artificial "spheres" of safety and immunity, leading him controversially to speak of "cultivating human beings". In this address, Latour defended his colleague against an attack by public sphere theorist Jurgen Habermas, to whom Latour retorted: "when humanists accuse people of 'treating humans like objects', they are thoroughly unaware that they are treating objects unfairly." For Latour, Sloterdijk's Sphere Trilogy (the first volume of which has just been published in English) counters the claims of humanists and phenomenologists alike by revealing the "different envelopes into which humans are thrown". For Latour, both Sloterdijk's sphere's and his own notion of actor-networks provide concepts that bridge the "great divide" between nature and human, subject and object, science and society, etc. To this end, both these thinkers look increasingly towards media art to bridge these divides by communicating science to the public. In this presentation, I thus look at how Latour's thinking (and to a somewhat lesser extent that of Sloterdijk), have captured the imaginations of new media artists, in particular those engaged with issues of environmental sustainability (a key example being Natalie Jeremijenko's Environmental Health Clinic). I also look at Latour's own personal engagement with new media through his curation at the ZKM in Karlsruhe in 2005 (an exhibition in which I participated), in specific those works which he selected to illustrate his concept of "the parliament of things". I argue that these ideas have contributed to the development of an emerging interpretive framework in which new media art and design practices see themselves (or at least can be seen) as giving voice to non-human agencies. I see this as an alternative to the more oppositional discourses typically associated with tactical media (more closely aligned with a Foucauldian 'analytics of power'), a form of engagement which Latour refers to as "composition" rather than "critique". This work is based on my PhD research under the supervision of Richard Rogers as part of the Digital Methods Initiative at the University of Amsterdam's Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis.