

# Rendering Things, Gathering Sites

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Exhibition Catalogue Essay

One frequently begins to think about art through the specificities of language. Definitions from philosophy, critical theory, a standard dictionary, common parlance or colloquial use offer methods for analyzing the visual worlds constructed by artists. Yet such a linguistic route into the work of Robert Bean is circuitous, even labyrinthine. An artist whose projects are deeply engaged with etymology, Bean's work shifts and morphs with its own conceptual language, ultimately evading prescription. His work takes influence from the history of science, media theory, communications technology and politics. Long fascinated by the kinds of entanglements that words and ideas produce, he is an artist who thinks as a historian or philosopher, as much as a producer of visual culture.

Bean's most recent body of work begins with the remote "thing sites" of the Thingstätte in Heidelberg, Germany and the Althing in Iceland. In ancient Nordic culture, the Thing was a public gathering of people for the purposes of governance and dispute resolution; the assembly site in Iceland is one of the oldest, situated in a rift valley between the North American and European continental plates. Referencing these ancient sites, the "Thing" movement was taken up as a propaganda strategy in Nazi Germany and *thingstättens* were inaugurated for the performance of nationalistic and quasi-religious theatrical productions. Intended to evoke a public nostalgia for communal gatherings, such sites were planned throughout the country but eventually abandoned as the Nazis deployed mass gatherings and spectacle through other means.

By combining traditional photography with computer-generated imagery, an architectural model, and a short video, Bean's project questions how we might render difficult histories visible in the present. Across these diverse works, shifts in language, form and perception offer new ways to read things, and thing sites, as objects entangled within the history of politics and the politics of history.

The common use of the word "thing" often seems careless or imprecise; for example, when we speak of "something", "anything", or "nothing" the subject of such a phrase is evacuated of meaning. Yet its historical connotations are rich, since the thing as an assembly is a reference to the physical sites designated for the division and debate of political ideas and beliefs systems. As a precursor to the parliament of the United Kingdom, the thing site is an operative precedent for a politics of governmentality.

The Thing has a storied usage in philosophy too, notably through German philosopher Martin Heidegger whose text, *Das Ding*, is a reference point for much of the object-oriented philosophy and thing theory at the forefront of recent thinking. As theorist and sociologist Bruno Latour has argued, things are not a matter of objects but a matter of politics. "Long before designating an object thrown out of the political sphere and standing there objectively and independently, the *Ding* or Thing has for many centuries meant the issue that brings people together precisely *because* it divides them."<sup>1</sup>

In Bean's exhibition this perhaps altruistic reading of the thing site is overshadowed by its usurpation by the Nazis in their pursuit of a celebratory program of German heritage, one that aimed to increase national patriotism through recourse to ancient Germanic Things. In the video, *Thingstätte 5*, we see a remarkable confluence of two generations inhabiting this relic of propaganda in radically different ways: an older generation, possibly tourists, slowly descend into the amphitheatre while several young athletes sprint to the top, perhaps oblivious to the loaded history of the site. Adjacent to the illustrious University of Heidelberg, this is a landscape deeply marked by the contestation of ideas and philosophies, ones embedded within an atmosphere that is both academically fertile and politically fraught. One can't help but think of the Nazi cult of the body, and its obsession with strength and perfection, when witnessing the sprinting athletes moving vertically through the amphitheatre.

Bean's engagement with things is not exclusively about sites or objects *per se* but equally about things as processes of rendering as much as sites of assembly. Like the "thing," the verb "to render" has multiple meanings and fragmented uses. To render is often to precede something, to act upon it, to cause a state to exist or cause it to change. To render is also to provide, assist or give up as much as it is to cover, hide, burn, or destroy. Its most frequent contemporary use refers to computer imaging, where rendering means to produce a visual image out of nothing, or more precisely, out of data.

In a fascinating mix of forms, Bean's series of photographs, *Remote Sensing* (2015), uses Google Earth to re-vision the Heidelberg site through the algorithmic failure of unmapped territory. The fragmented and abstracted screenshots suggest a new type of thing site, one hidden in the plain sight of technological ubiquity: the Internet. As a collection of geographically dispersed sites located in servers, offices and infrastructure across the globe, the Internet as a thing site is an unusual proposition. Certainly the speech knots produced in the digitally generated series *Visible Speech (Hannah Arendt)* and the CNC machined architectural model *Artifact 2*, remind us that the visual culture of machinic imaging produces *things* that are not understood as objects at all, and which perhaps have more in common with photographic theories of representation and originality than with object-oriented philosophy. The etymological fluidity of such things—the mix of usages between things as objects and things as spaces or sites of politics—seems equally applicable to the communication networks that today support contemporary life. The ability to read and transcribe meaning from coded script to screen is what enables communication across digital platforms, and likewise what enables contemporary politics to become widely visible.

What we now commonly call the "Internet of things" refers to WiFi-enabled objects—a world of digital devices that encompasses computers and phones, cars, fridges, thermostats and so many other planned automatons. Architect and urban theorist Keller Easterling points out that the more we become accustomed to using digital devices in all aspects of our lives, the harder it is to perceive the spatial technologies and networks that link such objects. Like the thing sites of the ancient world, the network is the *über*-thing that offers political agency to contemporary citizens. Easterling elaborates: "Spaces and urban arrangements are usually treated as collections of objects or volumes, not as actors. Yet the organization itself is active. It is *doing* something, and changes in the organization constitute information."<sup>2</sup> The thing site here is the organization of networked spaces on a global scale, an active assembly of information that far exceeds the connectivity of mere objects through advanced technological capacities.

In the work of Robert Bean, we find a powerful visual argument for the activation of networks and the rendering visible of the spaces of politics in our digitally enabled world. In time scales that bridge ancient public gatherings with contemporary networks, and the problematic politics inherent within, Bean's world is one vibrating with rendered things and constructed sites.

NOTES:

1. Bruno Latour "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public," in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, (Karlsruhe, Germany: ZKM Center for Art and Media, 2005): 24.
2. Keller Easterling, "An Internet of Things," *e-flux* #31, January 2012. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/an-internet-of-things/>

Jayne Wilkinson, April 2016

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