

JEFF DOLVEN

It's cold outside: you had better use your coat. A thoughtful recommendation, but you could be forgiven for assuming that English is not the speaker's first language. You might use your coat to smother a fire, or as a pillow on a long flight, but ordinarily you *wear* it. *Use* does not seem to cover the complexity of the relation, which is something more than instrumental—at least if it's your coat, the one you usually wear. One name for the difference is style.

I point to the difference because thing theory is characteristically concerned with use, while art history is more concerned with style. What follows is a footnote to the project of thinking things, meant to identify a seam. *Use* is the bogey of thing theory, or at least *mere use*. Its costs are practical (global warming: using up resources), existential (alienation from the thing-world), and intellectual (mistaking how the world works). There are two basic lines of reproach, the first via the ontologies of Heidegger and Harman. Heidegger accords things a hiddenness that withdraws from instrumentality. Harman radicalizes Heidegger by hiding everything from everything. The second comes from the network theories of Latour and fellow travelers. The camps of subject and object are replaced by a rhizomatic kingdom of quasi-objects, within which there are no privileged users, and nothing is merely used.

So you had better not use your coat. But didn't we already know that? One way of talking about the dissonance of the phrase, the reason it sounds obdurately odd, is to say style is a matter less of *use* than of *identification*. When you wear a coat, you imitate it; your way of being is cut to its specifications. The coat also imitates you, not just by taking the shape of your body, but by being the sort of thing someone like you would wear. There are ways, then, in which the agenda of thing theory is already accomplished by style. The distinction between subject and object is blurred. You are the coat, the coat is you; that common sense of style transfers among your other articles of clothing and the people you spend time with and their clothing and books and so on. Likewise, style describes social and historical space, illuminating and constituting networks that bind people and things together. Who else wears that coat, when and where was it in fashion? Any style is a map.

Then again: thing theory has, in its expanded sense of *demos*, a democratic impulse. All objects are equally hidden; all the nodes of the network are potentially equivalent. Style, by contrast, is not democratic and cannot be made to be. Connoisseurship is only the most sophisticated of its discriminations. No community, faction, movement without a style. Nor any artist. I pose the question how far thing theory can *see* style; how well it recognizes the dynamics of identification that organize our solidarities and prejudices. The number of objects we use may be small compared to the number we wear.

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