

Reassembling the Artwork: The Relevance of Assemblage Theory for Art Studies

Keynote

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Just as in painting, assemblages are a bunch of lines.
— Gilles Deleuze¹

In this article I would like to discuss how materialist philosopher Manuel DeLanda's "assemblage theory" could be of use to what I term art studies. I will begin by situating art studies in relation to art history and commenting on the differences. After a selective presentation of DeLanda's social ontology on assemblages, in turn following *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,² I will relate his theory to the concept of assemblage, its origin in the eighteenth century, as well as its references as an art term from the 1950s. The potential benefit of applying assemblage

theory to art history in the guise of art studies is that it enables us to pay detailed attention to the material (and material-conceptual) composite of the work of art as well as to the multiple ways in which such works connect, assemble, and reassemble with other works, agents, and forces throughout its continued existence. Theoretical assistance from Martin Heidegger and Bruno Latour allows me to specify how the notion of assemblage could be used for art studies focused neither on art nor history but on artworks as the first assemblage, followed by other assemblages, connecting with other works, agents, and institutions, i.e., social phenomena literally assembled or composed. I will present five types of assemblages hopefully relevant to art studies as a different way of doing history, as something ongoing and openly unfolding (assisted and assembled by us), thus theoretically immune to being "history" in the sense of over.

Art History or Art Studies

Art history, almost two centuries old, has arguably outgrown itself and become associated with conservative interests (of history), with the record-keeping of great deeds and monuments of the past, and with national heritage preserved in prestigious museums and archives. Simultaneously, it is associated with the comprehensive package of courses and programs for students and the so-called general public interested in the above. The label *studies* in art studies is straightforward, empty, and devoid of a temporal bias.³ Studies in *art studies* is importantly written in the plural, whereas *art history* is one or even – as in *the history of art* – determined as such. The inherent plurality of studies stands for a different practice; rather than align each work of art to its previous history of art, to find its place in a predetermined formation, it seeks to compose its successive history of



art, one that keeps unfolding. To use *history* for this kind of futural interconnectedness is not a given but a choice. History, however, as we art historians construe it, is also only one kind of *study* of art (actually, more than one!), although traditionally taken to be the only one, or at least the privileged kind.

A watered-down art history, as the name for any and every activity within this discipline, is obscuring what historical analysis is about. Removing the word history from the all-inclusive label of art history thus paradoxically serves to safeguard the interests of such an analysis. The kind of conflict alluded to here relates to the dual concept of history. A core ingredient of the pre-modern concept of history was inquiry (closely related to study), but with the modern reconceptualization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the concept came to ambiguously refer to two phenomena (invisible in English but not in German); either it referred to the object or the subject of study, either to what historians work with or on (*Geschichte* as the actual developments in the world), or to what they end up concocting (*Historie* as the historical texts about these developments).⁴ Obviously, a label

like art studies only refers to the latter part, the product of the scholar/historian. It thus avoids conflating the construction of history with “history itself” (*Geschichte selber*) or history out there, i.e., with still lingering sources of misunderstanding and pointless strife.

Studies emphasizes construction rather than reception, composition rather than representation. But how do we make sure we are dealing with actual, real stuff and not forgeries or fantasy? How do we ensure the links and connections presented are also connected to what *actually happened*?⁵ Even for traditional historians doing so is very difficult, but the historical profession is there to accomplish precisely this and to meaningfully quarrel about their interpretations, i.e., agreeing to disagree in a spirit of dissensus. Historians often enough rely on conjecture, educated guesses based on years in libraries and archives. The same will have to be required of an art studies person choosing this historical route, but there is a difference right at the heart of the concept of history.

History in History vs. Art History

The historian studying World War II will first have to acknowledge that the war is over

and that whatever it was will have to be reconstructed by the historian and presented in the historical text. Irrevocably determining the fact that a great war is over, apart from proclaiming a winner, is the coinage of the term postwar.⁶ The art historian studying Jackson Pollock’s painting *There Were Seven in Eight* from 1945 will first have to acknowledge that the painting is still around (in the Museum of Modern Art in New York). What it represented at the time of its conception, and why and how it came about, will have to be reconstructed along similar lines as the historian uses to understand the war. In the case of the historian, numerous documents, photos, and paraphernalia remain, but they do not constitute the war. The same kind of documentary material may exist for the art historian, but it is never enough to explain or understand the now 75-year-old painting, which still triggers responses as it hangs in a transforming world. It is not quite correct to say that the painting has *remained*; rather, it is *remaining* due to it being *maintained*, as it is undergoing subtle changes physically and due to its shifting interconnections and constantly changing environment. The war was an event but became a historical object of



investigation; the painting was made into an object of sorts but became a slow, ongoing event. Wars begin and end; paintings “begin,” which means that they are finished, but they never “end.”

The Art Function and the Being of Art

Art often denotes an object domain, a class of artifacts of a certain kind, but it is primarily a function, a task ascribed to a material entity. While the tasks differ, it might be justified to think of artistic production in general, and so-called visual arts especially, not as so many categories of material objects (art forms, genres, or mediums) but as a specific kind of engagement with material entities. Art is, in this view, an aspect, a way of viewing things. “To see something as art,” in Arthur Danto’s phrase, is to spot something invisible in the object before us. It is rather the specification of a visual mode, a position to adopt intellectually (and “to see” here has the connotation of “to understand,” if you see what I mean). Danto’s reflections on this subject were famously generated by his encounter with the mundane nonart look of the *Brillo Box* in 1964,⁷ and it is from this moment in Western art history, I would ar-

gue, that the still current globalized definition of art takes its cue, based, that is, on how to account for the fact that certain ordinary things or ephemeral happenings are classified as (high) art. At some point in the twentieth century, art came to be understood as a specific kind of attention or attitude to something. This loose definition used by multiple authors is mainly there to explain certain tough limit cases of avant-garde production, the ready-made especially (a precursor of the assemblage), but it offers, once in place, an improved definition of art also in the old, traditional, and ordinary “modern” (post-Renaissance) sense of the word.

What we are used to calling an art world could be rephrased as a “community,” the elements of which, according to DeLanda, “are composed of heterogeneous material bodies” like artworks.⁸ Furthermore, “these material bodies are linked by the enforceable social commitments created by the enunciation of speech acts,”⁹ e.g., “this is a work of art” or “this is a great work of art,” the coding of which may exercise performative power in Austin’s sense. The art world is a social institution – not unlike a community or organization – “a *collective assemblage of enunciations*

*of acts and statements of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies,”*¹⁰ which is close to what Danto theorized as “the transubstantiation of the commonplace,” a complete transformation brought about without changing the body of the object-turned-work. History in art history is often (and quite logically if art is seen as an object domain) understood as the chronological sequence (i.e., chronological as a matter of fact, not as a matter of mere arrangement) of artists of the past and their artistic artifacts. However, history is primarily, or so I will argue, a relation between artworks, still present, and other agents, mostly past but some present, including us. History, to use the parlance of Latour, is not a “matter of fact” but a “matter of concern” and continuous composition.¹¹ History in art studies is not so much *Geschichte* as *Geschehen* (course of events) connected to the functional capacity of artworks to be and relate to the world that it brings forth or projects.

Assemblage Theory and Art

In what he calls assemblage theory, DeLanda draws consistently on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (henceforth D&G), especially



their joint publication *A Thousand Plateaus* (chapters 4, 10, and 13). DeLanda's interest is applying assemblage theory to social constructs like organizations, cities, economies, or languages. It is not evident how such a study could be applied to art history/art studies, focused on artworks, although some of his examples are art/architecture/design or symbolic icons.¹² According to DeLanda, "all assemblages should be considered unique historical entities, singular in their individuality, not as particular members of a general category."¹³ Such a strong form of empiricism might seem suitable to established art history, but this is not how artworks are treated in art history as we know it. Rather than being approached as singular individuals, artworks are immediately (often unconsciously) subsumed under the general category of art (concept/theory, object domain, anthropological practice) to be just as automatically categorized as either painting or embroidery (art form, medium, technique), Finnish or Southeast Asian (nationality, region, culture), early seventeenth century or modern (period, epoch, temporality). Before we even encounter them for what they are or for what they were made to be, we tend to relegate

artworks to geo-cultural, most often national, and spatio-temporal compartments. This is also how museums and gallery collections classify artworks, how the art market deals and orders them, and how art history education refers to them. The classification is also filtered into art schools, although this way of dealing with artworks is typically of scant interest to artists.¹⁴

From out of the "simplest" definition of assemblage in the work of D&G, DeLanda concludes that "the parts that are fitted together are not uniform either in nature or in origin, and that the assemblage actively links these parts together by establishing relations between them."¹⁵ Two basic kinds of relations are relevant here: interior (or intrinsic) and exterior (or extrinsic). This part lends itself well to describing artworks and their outward connections. "Any assemblage component is," furthermore, "characterised both by its properties and by its capacities."¹⁶ Apart from internal properties (i.e., the size, format, and materiality of a work), artworks could be said to have "*emergent properties*, the properties of a whole caused by the interactions between its parts." As DeLanda mostly analyzes larger social wholes, such as commu-

nities or institutions, he might not be comfortable thinking of seemingly lifeless objects of art as social wholes or as having emergent properties, but this is precisely what this theory could help us reveal.¹⁷ Emergent properties of an artwork come close to what DeLanda references as capacities; how the work, in this case, from out of its internal constituency, is capable of releasing or eliciting certain emotions or effects, certain behaviors or responses, without which it would cease to be or function as a work of art. This also comes very close to ascribing agency to the work (a term used both to describe a principle capacity and the effectuation or actualization of this capacity).¹⁸ In fact, the concept of assemblage is a translation of *agencement*, closely related to arrangement, which, according to Ian Buchanan, is a preferable translation granted that it is understood as "a 'working arrangement' [...] an ongoing process rather than a static situation."¹⁹

The concept of art in an artwork is an invisible "linguistic entity," and the material work-part is filled with "non-linguistic expressive components." We could also say that the concept of art has "the capacity to code all the components of a given assemblage."



If it is art, then all of it is coded thus. This is not the important aspect of the work's capacity, however, which points outward into the work's immanent exteriority. A singular artwork can be seen as a whole, all heterogeneous parts of which (in their relations of interiority) retain their relative autonomy, regardless of how the work enters new relations of exteriority. The whole does not swallow up the parts but is added to the sum of them. An artwork as an assemblage would thus be a kind of whole that, due to its relations of exteriority, is well described as an "emergent whole," meaning that it does not "totalize its parts" or melt them into a unitary thing, a seamless entity.²⁰ An artwork is a whole *with* seams, only seemingly independent or autonomous. The individuality of the parts does not disappear in the whole of the assemblage.²¹ In other words, the identity of the parts of an artwork can be seen as retained in the work and could theoretically (sometimes practically too) be brought into another ensemble, another work, another assemblage. Such an assemblage is also "irreducible," which means that it cannot be reduced to its ingredients or parts. The exterior relations are, furthermore, contingent, not

essential as they would be "in an aggregate in which the components coexist without generating a new entity."²² The latter comes close to what Latour distinguishes as simplistic "intermediaries" as opposed to "mediators," which cannot but generate some new transformative aspect to the relational transfer.²³ In terms of scale, parts thus span from minuscule components of the work, assembled in/as the work, all the way to how the work literally partakes in creating greater networks and assemblages, with agents like other works, frames, copies, versions, exhibition spaces, various discursive formats (addressing, representing, and mediating the work), buyers, collectors, worshipers, thieves, fetishists, iconoclasts, and so on. These factors are typically jumbled together as "context" or inessential addenda, but they should be seen as a kind of co-creative "making with" or symbiogenetic agencies, in Donna Haraway's words, affecting the continued making of the work as such.²⁴

Drawing on historian Fernand Braudel, DeLanda speaks of history in the plural sense of "a multiplicity of flows, each with its own variable rate of change, its own accelerations and decelerations."²⁵ The assemblage

of a seemingly still or inert object of art could also be said to be composed or assembled of multiple, or at least several, flows, with different speeds, which is obvious from the material gaze of a microscope or a chemical analysis, disclosing different rates of ageing in the work. At the form, content, or signification level, we can think of different rates of change as well, where older paradigms clash or combine with newer elements, references, or connotations – something which has been discussed in terms of anachronic features.²⁶

Two sets of useful parameters drawn directly from D&G by DeLanda are *territorialization* and *deterritorialization*, plus *coding* and *decoding*. The first terms in these two sets are bound up with the determination of spatial boundaries and the fixation of identity, whereas the two latter terms in each set signal promoting dispersion and breaking free of any fixity. These two sets are thus loosely linked to intrinsic properties, on the one hand, and extrinsic emergence or capacity, on the other.

As opposed to a unity exemplified by "a Hegelian totality in which the very identity of the parts is constituted by their relations in



the whole,” an assemblage, with its properties and capacities, “involves relations of exteriority, that is, relations that respect the relative autonomy of the parts.” The distinction could be phrased as that of the crystalizing properties of an assemblage and its defrosting capacities. One property of a technical design object like a knife is its sharpness, coupled with its capacity to cut. An artwork like the above-mentioned Pollock painting has properties like shape, proportions, and color as well as capacities to stir, trigger, affect, or please, for example, but also to combine, connect, and associate with other works or agents in a way that affects the work itself in the process.²⁷ The latter makes clear that we are dealing with reciprocal relations here, external to the setup or properties of a work: “...when a capacity [virtual to begin with] does become actual it is never as an enduring state but as an event,” i.e., a moment, hinging on the attention given to the phenomenon by some person or agent. Such an event “is always double, *to cut–to be cut*, because a capacity to affect must always be coupled with a capacity to be affected.”²⁸ If the artwork is able to trigger certain sensations, we have already counted on

someone responding to it, affirming the possibility of such sensations. In fact, the word assemblage was first associated with humans congregating or assembling and only later came to refer to complex things.

The Term and Concept of *Assemblage*

“Assemblages are always composed of heterogeneous components,” according to DeLanda, and that is true of the term also in its earlier uses.²⁹ Etymologically, assemblage can be traced to the early eighteenth century, where it first referred to human beings coming together, in the sense of an assembly.³⁰ Interestingly, the human assembly links etymologically to the old Nordic word *ting*, which still resonates in *thing* (or German *Ding*).³¹ The link between assemblage and thing thus seems genetic. In colloquial as well as normative definitions of *artwork*, this term is also often seen as “the thing created by the artist” or a “fixed thing.”³² From the viewpoint of Martin Heidegger, however, the work of art is importantly neither a thing nor a utensil nor “equipment.” It is a work (*Werk*) that contains elements which could be called things: “...the thingly element in the work of art...is manifestly the matter of

which it consists.”³³ Heidegger has little to say about the artist in relation to the work, but the connection is fruitfully explored by Michel Foucault. To address the question of his well-known text “What is an author?” the text immediately introduces “the concept of a work” and its implications. The two terms are almost intertwined as “the enigmatic links between an author and his [sic!] works” are the issue.³⁴ Enigmatic or not, the two mutually define each other to the extent that we could think *author–work* and *work–author*, lest we should forget that an author always lurks inside a work and a number of works inside an author. In French, *l’oeuvre* has a double referent: to the individual work and the sum total of the works (of an author/artist), the latter being the term’s denotation as it migrated untranslated into non-French languages. In the parlance of assemblage theory, we could say that the individual work is a double assemblage between a concept of art and a work and between this ensemble and an artist/author. The sum of the works (of an artist/author) is a singular multiplicity on a different level, the *oeuvre* assembling the individual work to all other works with which this work is automatically related, in the ge-



neological sense of the word (they have the same creative “parent”) – each work a sibling, cousin, second cousin, adopted member, etc., of a whole family of works around the author/artist.

The term *assemblage* was first introduced in art criticism in the early 1950s by Jean Dubuffet, the French painter accredited with also coining the term *l’art brut*. The context was one of collage – of cut and pasted pieces of paper – but quickly expanded to include sculptural objects of various often-cheap or found materials.³⁵ The concept, elevated from the term, so to speak, can be traced to the 1961 MoMA exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*, curated by William C. Seitz. Here assemblage is not so much a thing or entity but a “method” or activity, dating back to Pablo Picasso’s Cubist practice in 1912. The claim hinges on the artist’s bold insertion of nonart objects into an artwork, most strikingly his affixation of “a piece of oilcloth, printed to simulate chair caning” onto an otherwise paint-covered canvas.³⁶ Apart from Cubism, the works included exemplified Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism seamlessly linked to “impatient, hypercritical, and anarchistic young artists” of today, i.e., the late

1950s.³⁷ The chronology ends with artists like Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg (on the verge of being defined as creators of pop art), or Allan Kaprow, more known for inventing art as a “happening.”

At times, Seitz’s rhetoric resembles DeLanda’s: “Assemblage is a method with disconcertingly centrifugal potentialities. It is metaphysical and poetic as well as physical and realistic.” Further, “[f]ound materials are works already in progress: prepared for the artist by the outside world, previously formed, textured, colored, and even sometimes entirely prefabricated into accidental ‘works of art.’”³⁸ This sentence interestingly highlights the artwork’s internal division or hybridity as the artist incorporates items with a temporality and identity of their own preserved in the work, which is one and not one. The capacity of an assemblage is not only to release agencies in the present and future but also to do so by unlocking potentials of its parts and its past.

As artworks are frequently associated with things, (artistic) assemblages are referred to as “objects” – as if work was too elevated a concept to use.³⁹ Heidegger would clearly object to such a usage since “the object-being of

the works does not constitute their work-being,” which is analogous to how he would treat the term thing.⁴⁰ It seems in the early sixties a thing or piece, or “art object,” referred in so many colloquial ways to artworks without evoking their age-old patina and pretensions. This is, for instance, the term used by Lucy Lippard to theorize the new phenomenon of conceptual art.⁴¹

While *object* might have been a hip update in the art world some 60 years ago, it has become increasingly useless. The main problem is its dichotomous structure, where each object immediately brings forth its subject (and vice versa). The jaded term *work*, however, has the potential to transcend this dyadic relationship. Heidegger again: “...however zealously we inquire into the work’s self-sufficiency, we shall still fail to find its actuality as long as we do not also agree to take the work as something worked, effected. To take it thus lies closest at hand, for in the word ‘work’ we hear what is worked.”⁴² Indeed we do, but that is not enough. The term work captures a threefold assemblage, between the work (1) invested in creating the work, (2) as a real work (*Werk*) of art, and the capacity of this work



to work (3) on the minds of its contemporary and future viewers, and to connect or assemble with other agencies throughout its so-called life. In 1969, Mierle Laderman Ukeles created a brilliant new art form called “maintenance art,” which constituted work, in the broad sense of laboring, such as cleaning – a neat assemblage between the two hitherto incomparable types of “work.”⁴³

Art is essentially poetic, according to Heidegger, in the sense of creative (*poiesis*); it “breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual.”⁴⁴ What happens when an ordinary fragment or “usual” object is displaced into an art setting is that it transforms from ordinary to extraordinary, from the “usual” sphere of things to the unusual sphere of (individual) works. This, I suppose, could be linked to Deleuze’s view on art as “a form of resistance” to the realm of the ordinary, which has another name: death. According to André Malraux, cited by Deleuze, art is “the only thing that resists death.”⁴⁵ And it does so by continuing to survive us all, living immune to dying.

Following another definition of assemblage by D&G, DeLanda asserts that an assemblage equals “every constellation of

singularities and traits deduced from the flow – selected, organized, stratified – in such a way as to converge...artificially or naturally. An assemblage is, in this sense, a veritable invention.”⁴⁶ This pinpoints the condition of possibility for each artwork. According to another (new) materialist, Jane Bennett, however, assemblages are referred to as “groups” or “groupings.”⁴⁷ But as each group can be dissolved, each assembly too, it would be impossible, entropically speaking, to dissolve the ingredients of an artwork (without destroying it). We can of course speak of a literal group of artworks as an assemblage. However, the more literally radical move I wish to put forward is to see each single work as a singular multiplicity or assemblage. No matter how “single,” unitary, or monolithic the work, if it is an artwork, it is an assemblage in several senses. We could also think of the object domain of art, the open empirical territory, grounding the scientific field of the discipline of art history, as an art assemblage, “an assemblage of assemblages.”⁴⁸ But this is, after all, just another big group and a predominantly literal understanding of the concept. Artworks are, in any event, not well described as groupings

but rather as convergences, constellations, compositions, or (small-scale) events.

The components of an assemblage are described by D&G as segments or lines, “some rigid (with a high degree of territorialization), some supple (low degree of territorialization), while still others act as *lines of flight*, marking the directions along which an assemblage can become deterritorialized.”⁴⁹ This connects to the territory of history, so to speak, where “lines” are traditionally associated with one-directional and irreversible progress, whereas D&G’s bundle of lines are undetermined and extendible, able to go anywhere, nomadically, rhizomatically, as they are unanchored by either origin or destiny.

History Removed or Realized? Art Studies and “History”

In *art history* (American) or *the history of art* (Anglo-Saxon), history either refers to the interconnections between art(works) of the past (whether in the world, in a region or nation, or in the case of an individual artist) or to the unmarked history of historical circumstances of production (Marxist history), of political or social and cultural conditions,



etc., for something like art to emerge and have a history of its own. In art studies, both of these senses may be relevant, but they are supplemented by yet another stretched definition of history associated with the one Heidegger sets in play in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” where it is said that history is what originates in each work. Each work has its particular history behind or before it (temporally speaking), which may help explain it, but it also opens up a history in front of it (before, spatially speaking), with no necessary end point in sight. This may sound like turning history on its head, reversing it, but it conforms to the essential experience, alluded to above, that, in contrast to the historical study of a past war, for example, the historical study of art (through artworks) deals with a phenomenon still around, still happening. “Art is history in the essential sense that it grounds history” and “[w]henver art happens – that is, whenever there is a beginning – a thrust enters history, history either begins or starts over again.”⁵⁰ Art, then, *is* happening. According to Heidegger, the work’s “happening of truth,” which does not refer to a true or false work, indicates that each work is seen as an event (*Ereignis*). The war

is past, but the artwork is present; the war *was* and was won or lost, but the artwork *is* (unless actually lost) – carrying its past with it, which means that its past is present in the work, akin to how we could say that our childhood personas are still within us: “...the work opens up a *world* and keeps it abidingly in force.”⁵¹ All art is thus world-historical in this specific sense.

A similar approach to time is evident in DeLanda’s “realist ontology,” which needs to include “not only the processes that produce the identity of a given social whole when it is born but also the processes that maintain its identity through time.” Furthermore, “[t]he historicity and individuality of all assemblages forces us as materialists to confront the question of the historical processes which produced or brought into being any given assemblage. We may refer to these as processes of individuation.”⁵² Thus, to grasp the assemblage of an artwork, we have “historical” processes to account for in the conventional sense of “historical,” meaning leading up to, determining, or even causing. Then, we have the processes that “maintain its identity through time,” which refers to a conventional sense of identity, connoting something sta-

ble and non-transforming. What I would add to this double processing of the artwork’s assemblage is that history is present on both sides of it, almost like a “cosmic force” (D&G) along with the work’s “individuation.” Moreover, the identity of the work is in a performative process of maintenance in the sense of enforcement, which constantly – if mostly unnoticeably – transforms it through time.⁵³

Assemblages of the Artwork

While creating a total analytical construct is far from my interests, some sorting out seems justified to clarify the levels involved. These would be the main types of assemblages relevant to art studies:

- *The conceptual assemblage* (between a concept of art, thus an art world, and a material entity/container/technical support)
- *The maker one assemblage* (between the artwork and the artworker/artist/ architect/designer)
- *The maker two assemblage* (between *the maker one assemblage* and the viewer/user)
- *The interior assemblage* (the artwork’s interior properties, including the territorializing ones on its border)



- *The exterior assemblage* (the artwork's exterior relations extracted from its emergent properties/capacities on the border of its further deterritorialization)

There are obvious overlaps here between the levels, and one could certainly think of further levels, e.g., between *the maker one assemblage* connecting/assembling with the artist's oeuvre and with the previous history of art. *The interior assemblage* is also there all along, connecting/assembling with material preconditions, such as mineral and fossil resources (oil, coal, etc.) and/or technical prefabrications (from tools to cultural sources). To directly address the question of what relevance these distinctions could have for art studies as distinguished from art history, the following seems most striking.

Conventional art history pays little attention to *the conceptual assemblage* or the concept of art (and/or the art world), which is not denied but presumed, and left for theoreticians to consider. Normally, art history is primarily devoted to the *maker one* and *maker two* levels (the historical origin of the work, chiefly connected to the artist

involved, and the implied as well as actual historical viewers). *The interior assemblage* is mainly left to conservation or technical art history to worry about as a subdiscipline of, or resource for, art history. *The exterior assemblage* is typically disregarded in art history, oriented as it is toward describing and understanding art historically, meaning what happened, how artists, artworks, styles, and periods emerged, and what they were about (past tense). The last-mentioned assemblage could perhaps be labeled *the "social" assemblage* (art history's conventional exteriority, aka context, according to which connection the artwork is seen as a part of a historically produced environment in which, and from the limitations of which, it must be understood).⁵⁴ The new emphasis of art studies vis-à-vis art history hinges on the fifth assemblage, according to which the thing/object/piece we have always known is seen as a durational being, as an event, interconnected with numerous posterior lines, webs, and constellations. Artworks become what they are by evoking and connecting with other agents through time, older or newer, thus transforming ontologically in this process.

Conclusion

My chief interest in pulling art history in the direction of art studies is history in the broad sense of tracing change and connections in and through time. This is of course paradoxical since why should the empty container *studies* be any better equipped to deal with *history* than a discipline that wears this name on its sleeve? Both alternatives harbor all established possibilities of the discipline; only one has history in its title, as if all these options were to do with history. Such a diluted catch-all history is absent from the label art studies, where history is not a default mode but a track or theme actively chosen. It all boils down to a curiosity about how things have been connected, and to what effects, and the fascinating fact that what has been connected, and capable of producing effects, often continues to do so. While conventional (art) history is associated with a record of past happenings, art studies conceives of history as ongoing, a number of events or becomings. In art studies, artworks become "historical" as they move through the world along a – theoretically speaking – never-ending nonlinear route of accessions and oblivion, coding and decoding, ins and outs.



Is the assemblage argument not overused here? Its author guilty of seeing assemblages everywhere, even when simpler interpretative concepts would have been sufficient or even more precise? Granted that every artwork could be seen as assembled, thus an assemblage, the term's chief potential is to be operative at a new level for another kind of history writing than we are used to in this discipline. This history of sorts would be stitched together (artworks have seams, remember) not with stable entities of a remote past that we recall and imaginatively revisit to construct eulogies about, but by units that emerge as they are united. An assemblage-oriented practice in this eclectic experiment is not concerned with being true to its theoretical sources. In fact, to practice theory along the lines of D&G is to stray from their own concepts and trodden paths. To be faithful to them is to betray them. I am equally irreverent about the father of "assemblage theory," although thankful for the inspiration and insights his condensation has provided. A final disclaimer: art studies with the new formula of assemblage theory is not out to reform, restrict, or replace art history but to challenge it, certainly, not by critiquing

it so much as to propose another constructive way of conceiving history in the field of knowledge of art, expanding the territory, extending its lines, securing its perpetual deterritorialization.

Notes

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1 Gilles Deleuze, "Eight Years Later: 1980 Interview," *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews, 1975–1995*, ed. David Lapoujade (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 178.

2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

3 A precedent is "world art studies," developed by John Onians and others. Cf. also how the very use of "studies" is pitched as transdisciplinary and experimental, and typical for younger academic formations. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), e.g., 155. A couple of drawbacks of the term are that it may refer to artistic practice and also serve as an umbrella for all the arts. Used as an explicit competitor to art history, however, its specific use value should be evident.

4 Cf. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

5 Leopold von Ranke, "Preface: Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations from 1494–1514," in *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 57.

6 This term typically denotes a difficult period of the epiphenomena of the war extending for years until this period, too, is over. "Postwar Europe lasted for a very long time, but it is finally coming to a close." Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (London: Penguin, 2006), 10.

7 Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld," *Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964); *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). Cf. also the important pluralization of the concept in Howard



- S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1982).
- 8 Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 55.
- 9 DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 55.
- 10 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 88.
- 11 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 87–120; Latour, “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto,’” *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010).
- 12 “To properly apply the concept of assemblage to real cases we need to include, in addition to persons, the material and symbolic artifacts that compose communities and organisations: the architecture of the buildings that house them; the myriad different tools and machines used in offices, factories, and kitchens; the various sources of food, water, and electricity; the many symbols and icons with which they express their identity.” DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 20.
- 13 DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 6.
- 14 Cf. the discussion on artworks versus works of art, the latter emphasizing process and becoming, in Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), ch. 3.
- 15 DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 2.
- 16 DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 52.
- 17 For a fruitful art-historical application of the concept of assemblage (rhizome and agency), see Mari Granath Lagercrantz, *Terracottaföremål från Ghana på British Museum: Materiella och immateriella assemblage*, Ph.D. diss. (Uppsala: Figura Nova Series 36, 2018).
- 18 Assemblage – not only because it is already an art term – seems a better description of the artwork here than actor-network, which may be considered its conceptual sibling.
- 19 Ian Buchanan, “Assemblage Theory and Its Discontents,” *Deleuze Studies* 9, no.3 (August 2015): 383, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281164910_Assemblage_Theory_and_Its_Discontents (accessed December 20, 2020).
- 20 DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 11, 51.
- 21 For John Dewey, you can have this cake and eat it too: “In a work of art, different acts, episodes, occurrences melt and fuse into unity, and yet do not disappear and lose their own character as they do so...” John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1980), 36.
- 22 DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 12. Buchanan accuses DeLanda of viewing the assemblage as an aggregate, which this quotation disproves. Buchanan, “Assemblage Theory and Its Discontents,” 388.
- 23 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 38f.
- 24 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), ch. 3.
- 25 DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 14.
- 26 Keith Moxey, *Visual Time: The Image in History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Dan Karlholm, *Kontemporalism: Om samtidskonstens historia och framtid* (Stockholm: Axl Books, 2014), ch. 8; Eva Kernbauer, “Anachronic Concepts, Art Historical Containers and Historiographical Practices in Contemporary Art,” *Journal of Art Historiography* no. 16 (June 2017).
- 27 Not only does the painting connect with its stream of viewers as well as with other Pollock paintings (all of them, actually, even later ones) and other works in the same style, it also literally forms an assemblage with the other paintings in the exhibition room, with which it is inevitably compared (also with the adjacent artwork that the painting will cohabit with when exhibited elsewhere). The MoMA purchase of the painting in 1980 hides the painting’s previous conditions and whereabouts, which its catalogue raisonné sums up as its provenance. The work also has a history of reception and reproduction, within which it is continuously re-assembled, seen, and interpreted anew, thus becoming a differing and more layered cultural artifact with each such step.
- 28 DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 73.
- 29 DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 20.
- 30 “1704, ‘a collection of individuals,’ from French assemblage ‘gathering, assemblage,’ from assembler (see assemble). Earlier English words in the same sense include assemblément, assemblance (both late 15c.). Meaning ‘act of coming together’ is from 1730; that of ‘act of fitting parts together’ is from 1727.” *The Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/assemblage>.
- 31 Latour, “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public,” accessed May 6, 2020, <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/208>; Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper, 1971), 161–84.
- 32 Jonathan Harris, *Art History: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- 33 Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 26, 28. Cf. also Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, ch. 1–3.
- 34 Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 118, 136.
- 35 *A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 37.
- 36 William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art/Doubleday, 1961), dust cover.
- 37 Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, 87.
- 38 Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, 84f.
- 39 A typical definition from the realm of visual arts is the following: “The use of three-dimensional found material (OBJETS TROUVÉS) to create art objects...” Edward Lucie-Smith, *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 22.
- 40 Heidegger, “The Origin,” 40.
- 41 Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of*



the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). Further discussed in Karlholm, *Kontemporalism*, 205–12.

42 Heidegger, “The Origin,” 56.

43 Cf. Patricia C. Philips, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art* (New York: Prestel, 2016); on the twofold notion of work, see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

44 Heidegger, “The Origin,” 70.

45 Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness*, 322f.

46 DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 79.

47 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 23f. This is also the main usage of the term assemblage in Granath Lagercrantz, *Terracottaaföremål*. On new materialism and the arts, cf. Katve-Kaisa Kontturi and Milla Tiainen, “New Materialisms and (the Study of) Art: A Mapping of Co-emergence,” in *New Materialist Methodologies*, eds. Felicity Coleman and Iris van der Tuin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).

48 DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 14, 37, 70, 102.

49 DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 109f.

50 Heidegger, “The Origin,” 74f.

51 Heidegger, “The Origin,” 43.

52 DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 18, 140.

53 A related theme, derived too from D&G, is “following,” in the sense of “how the work of art works materially-relationally: how it reaches beyond its object quality, how it affects.” Kontturi, *Ways of Following: Art, Materiality, Collaboration* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2018), 15.

54 Why “social”? Because this attribution, widely circulated, not only in the sociology of culture but also the social history of art, is virtually meaningless; because the social or the cultural cannot be subtracted from phenomena like artworks in the first place, much less, in a second step, be employed to explain or understand them. “The social is no longer a safe and unproblematic property, it is a movement

that may fail to trace any new connection and may fail to redesign any *well-formed* assemblage.” Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 8.

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