

Introduction

Assembly as Cultural Form

There are numerous terms for the expressive strategies people put to use on a daily basis across this warming planet. When a young child strings together the words “cat,” “hop,” and “tree,” she exercises the human capacity for *narrative*.¹ When magazine editors publish photographs of farmworkers picketing for better protections and compensation in the midst of a pandemic, they seize on the evidentiary power of *representation*.² When artists code scripts that generate inscrutable images on demand for a fee, they test the aesthetic (and economic) possibilities in *abstraction*.³ The range of such cultural forms is broad and diverse, from those that cut across fine art and the digital everyday, like *performance* and *parody*, to those that once tended to require (at least in their more official guises, before computers became widespread) special training and equipment, such as *mapping* and *visualization*. Ever the subject of experimentation, the many varieties of expressive strategies continue to inspire critical and philosophical debates. Each also serves as an umbrella term for a still more plural array of ways in which citizens, activists, artists, designers, and content creators use the media available to them—from sidewalks and exhibition spaces to social networks and algorithms—to think, speak, act, and interact, and thus to have a say in their own and others’ lives.

Given not just the number but the quite ingrained status of these different cultural forms, it might seem foolhardy to argue for the introduction and elaboration of one more. And yet this is not only possible, but necessary. This is because the form in question, which I call “assembly,” is not some exotic add-on known only in obscure internet forums, nor is it an esoteric aesthetic subspecies confined to academic journals. Rather, assembly has both seen a long history of use and enjoyed a recent, dramatic expansion. In this book’s assessment, assembly has become increasingly powerful

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and pervasive, first and foremost as a type of expressive artifact and communicative practice in its own right, but also as one among many strategies practitioners can creatively combine. Gathering projects from the humorous and brief to the serious and hard-won, *A Theory of Assembly* argues that, with the rise of digital and social media, assembly has come to equal narrative, representation, and other dominant cultural forms in its capacity to move audiences and mobilize publics, and just as crucially, to do harm. What we need, I contend, are new terms and taxonomies for artistic, activist, and everyday media practices whose lifeblood is expressive gathering, whether as small as a provocative visual comparison undertaken by one person or as large as the whole history of internet memes undertaken by millions.

Part of why these terms and taxonomies are needed is a long-standing imbalance.⁴ Despite the incessant hum of cultural formal invention (and despite digital technologies greatly amplifying that hum), European and North American writers have tended to prioritize certain cultural forms over others, with storytelling and mimesis (another term for representation) as the most commonly studied and celebrated among them.⁵ No doubt there have been efforts to introduce otherwise unnamed cultural forms, and this includes Lev Manovich's influential contention that a form deserving of the name "database" has begun to supplant narrative in its importance and reach.⁶ (I'll say more about this below.) Moreover, for the many writers working to undo the persistent Eurocentrism of art history, the interpretation of so-called "non-Western" cultural practices involves a refusal to adhere to prevailing Western assumptions around expressive strategies. (I think, for instance, of Carolyn Dean's distinction between "representational" and "presentational" objects in Inkan contexts.⁷) At the same time, as narrative and representation continue to enjoy pride of place, attempts to address the spectrum as a whole remain relatively rare. This book contributes to that much needed effort by showing that any rigorous accounting of available and valuable artistic and cultural practices in the internet era will be incomplete without assembly and its many subfamilies. From where I sit, to research and teach art and digital and visual culture *without* acknowledging assembly-based and assembly-infused projects is to leave unremarked a widely practiced form of cultural production that, simply put, matters.

But there is further reason why assembly deserves such extensive treatment. From acting as an engine of disinformation to opening unanticipated potentials for remembering, from reinforcing reductive accounts of gender to helping link social and environmental justice movements, assembly is of *particular* consequence in contexts of political and ecological struggle. It can offer an especially powerful means of intervening in prevailing accounts of certain disasters (chapter 4); it can also act as a method for justifying forms of slow and structural violence that unequally fall upon communities of color (chapter 5). It can support remarkably connective modes of aesthetic expression (chapter 2); it can also corrode the norms that sustain democratic life (chapter 3 and Conclusion). In other words, assembly is not only a forceful tool in the hands of the progressive and the emancipatory; it is also an insidious weapon in the hands of the reactionary and the antidemocratic. The power of assembly to support renewal and repair is also a power to undermine those things, quickly, widely, and repeatedly. Seeing, reading, and re-making assemblies—these are essential tasks. *A Theory of Assembly* shows just how much of this work remains to be done.

An Initial Definition and an Initial Set of Examples

So, what is assembly, such that it should be understood as equaling storytelling and representation, not only in the richness of its expressive capacities and the breadth of its distribution but also to the extent to which it can both mitigate and instigate violence and injustice?⁸ In chapter 1, I offer a full-fledged framework for the term, showing how uses of assembly cut across all manner of platforms, times, and places while also exhibiting significant expansions in accessibility, frequency, and influence in the digital era.⁹ For now, a more concise approach will have to suffice.

Here's the quick version. Assembly places expressive relationships front and center. To assemble is to convene, collate, and compile. It is to organize, arrange, and configure. An assembly is *any combination of expressive elements that maintains and seizes on the appearance of selection and arrangement*. To undertake or participate in assembly is *to contribute to the constitution, configuration, or use of an assembly at any scale*.

The longer version begins by clarifying the term “cultural form.”

For the purposes of this book, cultural forms are the “medium-nonspecific” or “transmedia” structures and strategies that animate acts of communication and interaction.¹⁰ The book also welcomes N. Katherine Hayles’s more sweeping take: different cultural forms embody “different cognitive, technical, psychological, and artistic modalities,” and they offer “different ways to instantiate concepts, structure experience, and embody values.”¹¹

Like other cultural forms, assembly is both a type of thing and something people do. (One can, for instance, encounter an assembly in a museum or a social media feed, but one can also participate in collaborative or “crowd-sourced” assemblies, like participatory archives.) Whereas narratives conjure up events and characters and representations convey scenes and subjects, assemblies convene what I call “constituents.” These constituents are often things like words and images, but other kinds of entities can also act as the constituents of media assemblies, such as objects, numbers, and sounds, or even humans and nonhumans.

What ultimately distinguishes the cultural form of assembly is the way people engaged in the form make use of those constituents.¹² With most cultural forms, the point is, more often than not, to provide the reader/viewer/user something effectively transcendent, such that some separate and coherent thing, such as a picture, story, visualization, or performance, supersedes the component parts. Kurt Vonnegut rightly emphasizes the role of the imagination in these processes: “The imagination circuit is taught to respond to the most minimal of cues. A book is an arrangement of twenty-six phonetic symbols, ten numerals, and about eight punctuation marks, and people can cast their eyes over these and envision the eruption of Mount Vesuvius or the Battle of Waterloo.”¹³ In the case of assembly, by contrast, the relations between constituents, collections of constituents, and the overall arrangement are much more porous and, as it were, democratic. The different constituents function like citizens: they remain apart from each other as separate, discernible elements (such as one among many pictures or one among many instances of a meme); they persist in distinct and meaningful positions; and they also are in conversation, collaboration, and sometimes conflict with the constituents that precede, exceed, or surround them. From obvious differentiation to an unruly flurry of impressions, these intersecting, overlapping, and

often nonlinear relationships among constituents generate multiple expressive, experiential, and semantic effects, provided the reader of (or participant in) the assembly is ready to engage and co-produce them.

Among the more common variations on assembly are the *viral comparisons* that circulate through social media platforms. These comparisons characteristically involve the readily shareable unification of disparately sourced media, in many cases as means of revealing unacceptable contradictions, but perhaps most often as a comforting amusement. (Comparative assemblies frequently, but not exclusively, look like what W. J. T. Mitchell calls “image-texts,” which is to say “composite, synthetic works . . . that combine image and text.”¹⁴) Among the most poignant examples of the contradiction-oriented work of viral comparison is a juxtaposition of news photographs of people wading through floodwaters in New Orleans after the levees broke in 2005 (Figure I.1). In this assembly, which I analyze at the outset of chapter 4, the photo of the pair of white people is captioned as “finding” goods while the photo of the Black person is captioned as “looting.” The comparison was widely shared, helping to set off a national reckoning with racialized media-framing and with the structural (and often fatal) undervaluing of Black lives.

Whereas the Katrina comparison is a participatory one-off, the prolific and widely shared work of Uğur Gallenkuş (to pick just one among many possible further examples) indicates the potential for comparative assembly to become an activist-artistic mode in its own right. In this case, it is by way of one image of peace, safety, and belonging, typically a stock image or a canonical Western painting, fused with a second, typically photojournalistic image of conditions of war, suffering, and injustice (Figure I.2). While producing a momentary delight at unexpected fusion is a risk for certain comparisons made by Gallenkuş, it's the driving purpose of others, among the more successful of which is the “Woman Yelling at a Cat” meme. In the germinal instance of this meme, a Twitter user was delighted to no end by the pairing of two already viral images: on the left Taylor Armstrong, at that time a cast member on the television show *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, pointing and yelling, and on the right a seemingly angry (or maybe just smug) cat sat at a dinner table. Users across Reddit and other platforms

Racism

ALL SIZES



AP Associated Press AP - Tue Aug 30, 11:31 AM ET

A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2005. Flood waters continue to rise in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina did extensive damage when it

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RECOMMEND THIS PHOTO - Recommended Photos Recommend It Average (138 votes) ☆☆☆☆☆ ★★★★★



AFP 3:47 AM ET

Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans, Louisiana. (AFP/Getty Images/Chris Graythen)

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Look at the two of these photos on Yahoo News - notice anything different between them? According to Yahoo, black people "loot" -- white people "find."

Originals:
news.yahoo.com/photo/050830/480/ladm10208301530
news.yahoo.com/photo/050830/photos_ts_afp/050830071810_sh...

Figure I.1. A "viral comparison," this is among the earliest instances of media or "generative" assembly undertaken in response to Katrina. "Racism" as posted to Flickr by dustin3000 (2005).

took this playful pairing as the opportunity for variously trivial, funny, relatable, and repugnant acts of digital visual contribution (Figure I.3). Although these three and countless other examples could be interpreted through frames like storytelling, representation, and performance, to apply these more dominant terms would mean overlooking the work they do in placing selected constituents into compelling arrangements. Doing so would also distract from the degree to which the force or the appeal of this expressive work



Figure I.2. A view of Instagram posts by Uğur Gallenkuş, all of which engage in comparative assembly. Screenshot, September 2020.



Figure I.3. A selection of examples of the “Woman Yelling at a Cat” meme. All collected in 2019.

is the provision of an assembly-based experience of dwelling in analogies and disanalogies (or of simply taking pleasure in certain visual pairings). As the long histories of political cartooning and before-and-after imagery attest, the internet didn't invent the revealing or provocative comparison.¹⁵ But it did redistribute the keys to anyone with access to Photoshop (or even just a free “meme generator” tool), so much so that comparative assemblies are, for now

anyway, a quotidian and political rhetorical staple of millions of people's daily or even hourly media diets.

Less common but no less important types of assembly appear in contexts quite different from rapid-fire social media, such as the art gallery or the art museum. In places like these, designations and taxonomies do not tend to be unofficial and protean, but established and orderly. That means there are dominant categories, things like general type (e.g., art or not-art), medium (e.g., sculpture), movement (e.g., Mexican muralism), and origin (e.g., outsider art). There are also authorities, from scholars, curators, and tour guides to metadata standards and usage guidelines, working to ensure the normative repetition of those categories. Of course, all efforts to retain established orders notwithstanding, many aesthetic practices continue to elude such organizational schemes.¹⁶ To borrow Hanneke Grootenboer's language, many artworks and art practices might indeed inhabit well-worn (and often quite accurate) categories, even self-consciously, but they are also "embedded in an ever expanding network of shapes and forms," and they exist "as a result of a shaping and reshaping of these forms."¹⁷ One of this book's arguments is that the actual, lived palette of possible artistic forms and strategies well exceeds current habits of seeing, and one of the most important missing pieces (particularly in the digital era) is art that specifically and strategically commits to aesthetics of compilation and configuration, relation and arrangement—to assembly.

In chapter 2, I elaborate this argument through a critical typology of art in the mode of assembly. That means addressing everything from a sequence of internet-sourced photomosaics, to basalt columns on an island off Reykjavík, to a recuperative gathering of animated GIFs. Indicative of the considerable scope of assembly, my examples cut across mediums, genres, and subject matters, reaching as far back as Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. What binds this large and heterogeneous set of instances of "aesthetic assembly" is not, as E. H. Gombrich would have it, the projects' appeal to "the habits and mental sets we acquired in learning to read representations."¹⁸ Instead, it is their appeal to the habits and mental sets we acquired in learning to read relationships. Take a deceptively simple piece like *Nocturnes II* by Milagros de la Torre (Figure I.4). From one vantage, the work is indeed a sequence of photographic representations of a digital clockface at an angle, and



it is in that sense a poetic image of night that also implies a story (or many stories) of insomnia.¹⁹ From another vantage, however, the work is a confluence of constituents, not just the five individual images, but the elements consistent across those images: the numbers, the colon, the light they cast, the dark that surrounds them. To read this work well, in other words, is to linger in the fact and the potentials of those constituents' expressive interplay. That can mean a kind of experiential immersion in the mode of "firstness," as with watching subtle variations in the light (such as the seeming differences in intensity among the lines that make up the numbers, or the variation across the blurring of the frames). It can also mean interpretation in the mode of "secondness," or what Mitchell calls the "onset" or "event of recognition" of an image (in this case, an assembly of images).²⁰ One can work with the dense meanings and potentials in the artist's configuration, such as its gathering of a darkness that doesn't fade, or the way it "alludes to a varied and complex network of personal responses and references such as our sensations of the notion of time, of the activities induced by the night, of insomnia, and of the border between sleep and wakefulness."²¹ One can also glimpse would-be emulations on social media, such as repeat images of an alarm clock fused with text overlays for a modest mapping of the unruly thoughts of a sleepless night, an ephemeral assembly scanned by a few, soon replaced.



Figure I.4. Repeated views of a digital clock afford an expressive interplay. Milagros de la Torre, *Nocturnes II*, 2002. Archival pigment print, 16 × 52 inches.

Artists (and curators and still others) working in the mode of aesthetic assembly can produce countless further variations on such experiential and interpretive generativity. They can do so through many media and platforms, not just through assemblies of images, but through installations, “warm” databases, transhistorical exhibitions, or even activist actions. Crucially, those who engage in aesthetic assembly do so in a manner that does not seek to overcome the fact of combination. Instead, they make that fact into the primary source of emotional, semantic, political, or still other effects. In so doing, they speak to the promise of reassembly: that, as Jacques Rancière puts it, “every situation can be cracked open from the inside” (or so one might sometimes hope), and that, at their best, artistic works and practices (and the people who engage and question and make use of them) can help “reconfigure the landscape of what can be seen and thought.”²²

As yet another kind of assembly, the *thematic list* hovers between viral comparison and aesthetic assembly: while it can be read quickly, it also tends to take nontrivial quantities of time and resources to produce. On the generally less remarkable but still quite successful side of this family within a family are the many varieties of shareable lists and “listicles” that “infotain” (and some might say prey on) those in the midst of commutes or other contemporary downtimes. Perhaps you have seen one, maybe even in

the last twenty-four hours. With titles like “26 Signs You’re a Great Boss—Even If It Doesn’t Feel Like It” or “Top 10 Bloody Histories Behind Common Surgeries,” these lists perform basic functions of rapid education and reductive representation, but they are also, in the vein of assembly, tightly packaged symbolic combinations that consolidate particular values and concerns, and that readers scan and pass along as constellations worthy of temporary diversion.²³ Not necessarily opposed to but still quite divergent from this end of the subfamily of thematic lists are the various abstract, activist, and quasi-archival inventories produced by artists and other media practitioners with all manner of social and experimental intentions. Here the otherwise orderly exercise of placing one thing after another becomes the means to produce kaleidoscopes of meaning-making and perception-altering.²⁴ As Umberto Eco shows, examples of such thematic lists are rich and numerous: they reach back to antiquity and extend into the very fabric of the World Wide Web, which Eco characterizes as a massive exercise in inventory.²⁵ Although not his intention, Alan Liu likewise speaks to a long history of such media forms, particularly in his suggestive reframing of the premodern time tables of Eusebius of Caesarea as “patchy” assemblages capable of historical and semantic linking.²⁶ Among the most cited instances in the realm of art is a list of both familiar and untested artistic potentials I analyze in the second chapter: Richard Serra’s late 1960s *Verb List*, a typology of verbs (“to differ,” “to disarrange”) and subject matters (“of simultaneity, of tides”).

Another poignant example from the mid-1970s was a response to a question posed to multiple artists by Lucy Lippard, Ruth Iskin, and Arlene Raven: “What is feminist art?” Rather than answer in the mode of argument, allegory, or abstraction, Joan Snyder opted for what Eco might call a “chaotic enumeration,”²⁷ only not in the sense that the two-page handwritten list fails to make any sense (Figure I.5), but in that it dwells in a multiplicity of perceived features of the “feminine sensibility,” embodying the simultaneously resistant and collectivist character of feminist art.²⁸ Albeit to much different effect, that dual character is again on display in a collaborative variant on the thematic list undertaken several decades later called *Art + Feminism*.²⁹ Here it is not an explicit enumeration put on paper; it is an ever-expanding, theme-driven inventory to which volunteers add by way of action. They add to this inventory by attending gatherings dedicated to creating and improving one

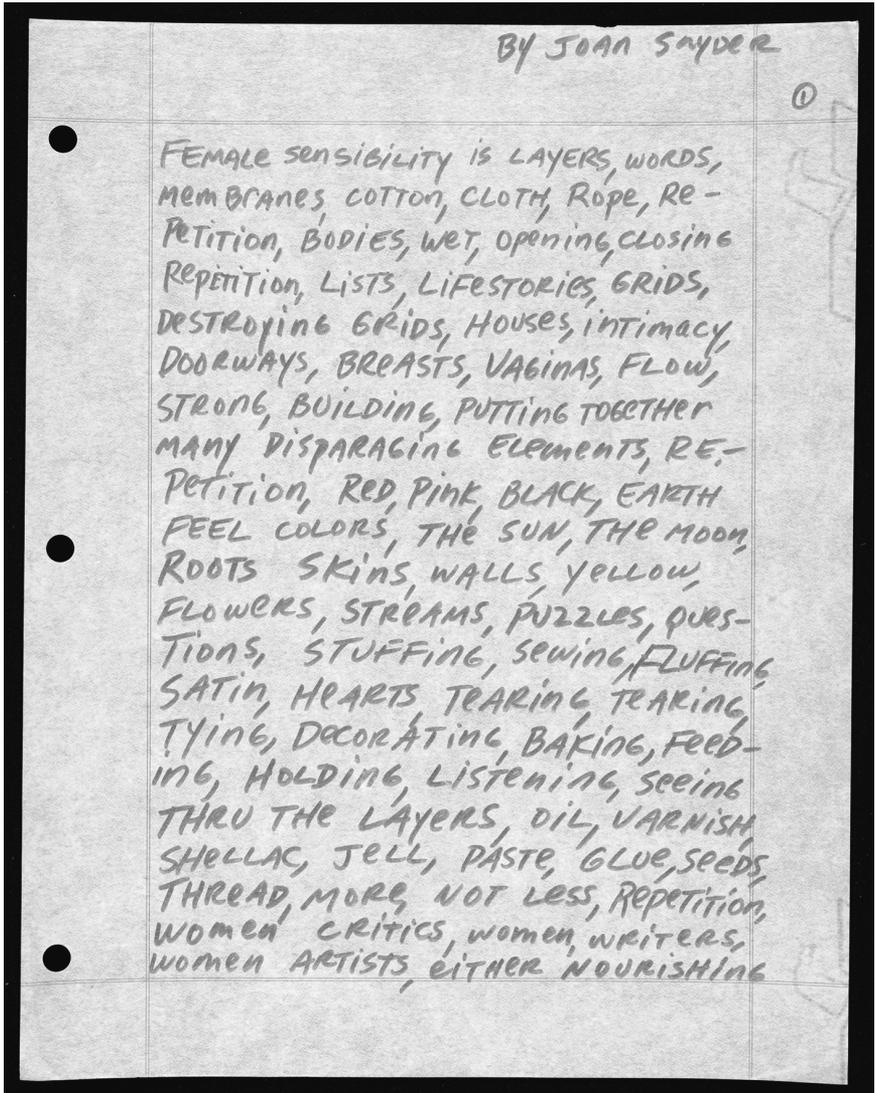


Figure I.5. Joan Snyder's enumerative response to "What is feminist art?" (1976/77). Woman's Building Records, 1970–92. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Courtesy of the artist.

Wikipedia article after another on otherwise underrepresented communities across the arts: cis and trans women, nonbinary people, and Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. As in-person and virtual "edit-a-thons" grow in number, and as the

people involved become more informed and connected in the process, so also grows the available capacity to see, cite, speak about, and curate the work of these practitioners. Ephemeral activist assemblies can beget enduring media ones.

Still other types of assembly take shape and produce effects at scales even larger than *Art + Feminism*. These can involve vast numbers of participants, even tens of millions, and often extreme quantities of visual, verbal, and other constituents. My name for this family—*distributed assembly*—embraces the paradox of decentralized gathering.³⁰ One of the most important examples is the hashtag, typically (and correctly) framed for its functions relative to access and dissemination. Adding a hashtag to a post tends to increase the likelihood of it being #discovered. But there is another, essential sense in which the rise of the hashtag was a dramatic expansion in the capacities of broad publics to assemble together. This is not to say that people could literally gather better and more frequently because of the hashtag (although, as Zeynep Tufekci observes in a book on the power and fragility of networked protest, activists can come to see “no need to spend six months putting together a single rally when a hashtag could be used to summon protesters into the streets; no need to deal with the complexities of logistics when crowdfunding and online spreadsheets can do just as well”).³¹ It is to say that many people using the same hashtag for similar reasons are engaging in a mutually informing practice of assembling media constituents from virtual removes. One of the key implications of such dispersed practices is the production of malleable, heterogeneous media assemblies to which one has provisional access by way of search, assemblies that, as ever-expanding aggregates, can “say” something no individual could on their own, a kind of distributed political speech of which no body, user, or platform is the sole origin.³² Think, for instance, of the media, conversation, and affect produced in connection with a hashtag like #MeToo, based on the phrase used since 2006 by Me Too founder Tarana Burke, or the perspectives and commitments circulated through campaigns like #CiteBlackWomen, initiated by Christen A. Smith in 2017.

Of course, another, quite different implication of hashtags, digital archives, memes, and other avenues of distributed assembly is of a different order: the enhancement of hidden datasets that feed

into everything from market research and “behavioral surplus”³³ to crime-prediction algorithms (or, in Ruha Benjamin’s terms, “crime production”³⁴). Hidden troves of data constituents also play a role in the production of new and unseen images by machines for machines (and for the states and businesses that make use of those machines), what Trevor Paglen calls an “invisible visual culture,” and what Joanna Zylińska calls “nonhuman photography.”³⁵ One form of assembly occasions another, and the way one contributes to media assemblies has many varying effects, not always visible, on what kinds of assembling and disassembling are possible for oneself and others going forward.

Viral comparison, aesthetic assembly, thematic list, and distributed assembly are just four among multiple versions of a cultural form that is both extremely widespread and insufficiently theorized. I present these initial examples because they support the argument that assembly has both long existed and recently become newly ascendant thanks to digital and networked technologies, along with the structures and incentives that spread and embed those technologies. I also present these examples because they begin to answer a line of skepticism certain readers will inevitably (and understandably) bring to *A Theory of Assembly*. Maybe (this line of skepticism goes) the book is simply taking existing cultural forms, like montage, assemblage, bricolage, collage, or the aforementioned “database,” and pretending they are all cut from the same cloth. Maybe it ought to be framed as montage and assemblage meeting the internet. Or maybe the book ought to be framed as an update of Manovich’s claim that many new media artifacts are, like databases, “collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other.”³⁶ This initial cluster of examples answers these doubts by pointing to a distinct and powerful way of using and making media that takes shape at widely varying scales. Each version of assembly I have cited centrally involves seizing on combinations of constituents that remain both separate and highly interactive, combinations that can sometimes have the “same significance as any other” but that more often exhibit complex gradations of importance and intensity. And each centrally involves engendering meaningful or moving (or at least momentarily diverting) effects out of those combinations that could not (or not quite) be engendered otherwise. In short,

assembly is all about relationships, from the simple to the complex, from the small to the sprawling, from the clear to the enigmatic. We are overdue in recognizing just how many cultural practices thrive on relational rather than representational, narrative, database, or other modes of expression.³⁷

This isn't to say that other expressive forms can't exhibit similar characteristics, such as an instance of "database narrative" in which the layout speaks as much as the "data" and the storytelling, or a project of sound collage that opens itself up to the contributions of outsiders. (The latter is on display in certain stretches of the radio show *Over the Edge* in which the host invites audience members to phone in improvised contributions to the show's emergent soundscape.³⁸) Nor is it to deny the conceptual overlaps between assembly and database, both a shared call to shift our premises around cultural forms and a mutual (but, in the case of assembly, not exclusive) emphasis on the significance of media practices that, as Hayles puts it, "construct relational juxtapositions," or that can readily welcome new elements without "disrupting their order."³⁹ However, the presence of overlaps is not reason to suspend inquiry—not even close. We must think outward from what is out there, and we must follow the connections as they exist and emerge. Time and again, this book will present projects and practices for which "montage," "database," and other proximate terms are insufficient, or for which an emphasis on the fusion or "dance" or "complex ecology" of cultural forms, including between assembly and narrative, proves essential.⁴⁰ This will be true of expressive actions at the smaller end of the scale, like the juxtaposition in response to Katrina. It will also be true of much more diffuse undertakings, including the vast, anarchic world of memes.

Forming language and critical frameworks for these practices serves to expand the palette of artistic possibility, a shift with implications for practices of description, production, purchase, display, and critique across art, art history, and museums. It grants overdue attention to (and provides new analytical armature for) the remarkable inventiveness (and insidiousness) of assembly-based and assembly-infused cultural production in the internet era. And it helps to counter the understandable but overbearing influence of storytelling and image-making in strategic conversations around

aesthetic and activist responses to large-scale disasters and to slow and structural violence.

Plural Reading, or Family Resemblance as Method

If one set of doubts facing *A Theory of Assembly* turns on the suspicion that instances of assembly are really just instances of other, already-known cultural forms, another set of doubts turns on the seemingly impossible heterogeneity contained within the concept. A Redditor's "exploitable" recasts the Bing search engine as more obscure than the dark web (chapter 1). An artist collective lofts a two-mile line of balloons with Indigenous iconography over the Mexico–U.S. border (chapter 2). A "meme warfare consultant" helps launch a repugnant meme that makes its way to the president's Twitter account (chapter 3). A digital archive includes a visualization of keywords that places both marginalized and dominant perspectives on a disaster side by side (chapter 4). Social media accounts attempt to undermine the science of climate change through deceptive comparisons (chapter 5). How can such manifestly different projects be analyzed together in any meaningful way? Shouldn't their medium specificity, thematic disparity, and dissonances of tone and purpose make such inquiry impossible?⁴¹

One answer to these important questions is the framework for assembly presented in the first chapter, in which I define assembly as a mixture of constituents and positions, selection and configuration. Another is a matter of distinct approach. This book assumes that conversations around what cultural forms exist and matter will remain unnecessarily limited if they shy from the possibility of actively comparing uses of "old" and "new" media that otherwise seem too different to compare. Along these lines, *A Theory of Assembly* pursues a method that anyone in art history, visual studies, digital studies, or other fields could take up, what I call—in conversation with practices like "close," "distant," and "surface" reading—*plural reading*.⁴²

The conceptual foundations of plural reading rest in a well-trodden terrain: the philosophical notion of family resemblances.⁴³ Albeit not in so many words, the notion has been in circulation in Europe since at least as early as the thirteenth century.⁴⁴ It finds



Figure I.6. An “object labeling” meme in which Bertrand Russell targets his predecessor Gottlob Frege, while (early) Wittgenstein targets his mentor Russell and (later) Wittgenstein targets his earlier self. Anonymous, circa 2019.

its most potent articulation in *Philosophical Investigations*, a book in which, as several image memes recall, Ludwig Wittgenstein disavowed not just his mentor’s but also his own work (Figure I.6).⁴⁵

What are family resemblances? Say we are trying to determine what binds a particular set of things together, what makes them of a piece with each other. We could attempt to distill an essence across many uses: the thing that is common to all of them, the universal shared trait. But countless phenomena, including Wittgenstein’s oft-cited example of a game, end up defying such an

approach. Multiple things can deserve the name “game,” and yet no single feature will necessarily unite all of them, nor safely delimit their boundaries. Maybe *most* involve some amount of play, for instance, but not *all* of them will, or not all of them will require that feature in order to be understood as games. (I think of a war game, in which play is not an integral component.) Reading for family resemblances neither dispenses with the work of analysis nor acts as though the world were hopelessly undefinable. Instead, it shifts the interpretive practice. One examines the many overlapping and diverging features across multiple cases, such as ball games, board games, and card games. (I should note here that it’s well worth considering the roles of media assembly in video, role-playing, and what Ian Bogost calls “persuasive” games.⁴⁶) What results is a markedly plural exercise of interpretive watching and listening. We observe a carousel of analogy and disanalogy; in Wittgenstein’s words, we “see how similarities crop up and disappear,” both dominant similarities and less common ones.⁴⁷ As daunting as this method might initially seem, it is merely a matter of revising one’s assumptions around how diverse things can interrelate. Whether studying concepts, media, cultural practices, or still other matters, what one encounters is a network of linking similarities that are not necessarily shared across all cases, or at least not to the same degree. In other words, there can be commonalities that link nearly all cases while nevertheless not being essential or universal.⁴⁸ Just as importantly, there can be binding commonalities that might be shared by only a handful of family members (a small subfamily within the overall family) but are nevertheless highly significant and worthy of critical and interpretive attention.⁴⁹

This book turns Wittgenstein’s philosophical response to problems of categorization into a flexible method for analyzing culture and media.⁵⁰ This has been done in partial ways before me, such as when philosophers have countered monolithic definitions of art with more porous schemes based in family resemblances. But this book’s use of family resemblances is not quite the same as these others. Rather than compare types for the sake of a more inclusive taxonomy, we inductively compare and speculatively categorize instances of cultural production for the sake of thinking and practice, sometimes emphasizing very large commonalities, like assembly, other times more particular ones, like the practices of “expressive

folksonomy” in meme cultures (chapter 3) or “emergent archiving” after disaster (chapter 4).⁵¹

As many readers will recognize, plural reading’s precedents aren’t limited to family resemblances. One important precursor is Heinrich Wölfflin’s influential use of a double slide projector in art history classrooms. Another is André Malraux’s recombinatory museum of the imagination or “museum without walls.”⁵² There is also the comparative work of Charles Robert Cockerell and other nineteenth-century figures influenced by his rich assembly-based “drop-scenes.”⁵³ Finally, more recently, Tina Campt infuses her striking practice of “listening” to archival, state, and identificatory images with methods of reassembling and comparing, including what she calls at one point “stereoscopic and stereophonic juxtaposition.”⁵⁴

What plural reading adds to such precedents is both the emphasis on generating flexible and sometimes speculative categories *and* the considerably higher levels of heterogeneity, quantity, and scale invited into the mix.⁵⁵ One way to summarize the stakes of plural reading is to say that it offers a way of remaining assured and attentive amid the forbiddingly complex analogical networks that characterize digital and visual culture. One opts to persist with analysis while comparing collections of things that exhibit variously general, frequent, and rare similarities. Meanwhile, differences need not fall out the window. They remain there, too; in fact, differences become even more evident and important because we have adopted a flexible and intersectional way of seeing that does not accept rigid binaries or settled systems, but emphasizes overlapping frames, soft borders, gray areas, and outliers. As Mieke Bal puts it in defense of anachronism and “interhistorical” exhibition in art, “approximation does not come at the cost of historical difference; on the contrary, it enhances it, deploys it as a tool to sharpen how and what we can see.”⁵⁶ In Campt’s terms, an assembly of images that forgoes a single, “unifying attribute” can produce “patterns of similarity that yield multiplicity and difference.”⁵⁷

As if elaborating the interpretive combinatorics of Aby Warburg’s unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas*,⁵⁸ and building on Griselda Pollock’s Warburg-inspired “virtual feminist museum” that “break[s] all the museal and art historical rules of what can be put together with what,”⁵⁹ we come to see that there are families of media and cul-

ture that constitute families for reasons other than their technical basis (like photography) or their broadly common domain (like social media) or their historical affinities of style or geography (like Dutch still life). Instead, there are families based on other kinds of similarities and “exploratory relations” that are often quite unfamiliar, understudied, and “unnatural.”⁶⁰ Form, function, effect, mode, material—there can be many kinds of linking similarities that point to the existence of a particular family, even if the “members” of that family derive from quite different cultural, geographical, and historical contexts. Along these lines, as I emphasize again in the conclusion, the plural reading of assembly shares affinities with well-established queer and feminist approaches, including what Eve Kosofosky Sedgwick calls “reparative reading.” This is a fundamentally relational mode that seeks to “organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates,”⁶¹ a mode that, as Olivia Laing puts it, works to “find or invent something new and sustaining out of inimical environments.”⁶² To read for family resemblances is, at its most vital, to read for renewal.

Of course, at the end of the day, it is not the conceptual basis but the actual, achievable fruitfulness of plural reading that matters most, and in that sense a new slate of examples is in order. Let’s start with a nondigital one: Louise Bourgeois’s 2006 work *10 AM IS WHEN YOU COME TO ME* (Plate 1). The title of this piece (of which Bourgeois made ten unique versions) refers to the point in the morning when Bourgeois’s longtime assistant, Jerry Gorovoy, would arrive at the studio. In interview, Gorovoy recalls the artist’s “whiplashes”: something “deep inside her” would be triggered or unlocked, and this something would “re-emerge as aggressive and self-destructive impulses.”⁶³ His role would be to “calm her down,” and this is, in his recollection, what Bourgeois “wanted to convey in the suite of hand poses,” that Gorovoy’s arrival meant the return of safety and the readiness to work again. The assembly itself gathers one configuration after another of their hands (Bourgeois has a wedding ring), sometimes in isolation, sometimes overlapping. With those hands and arms reaching both outward and to each other, the work is a rendering of friendship and warmth; it is also something of a “map of their working relationship” and of the “varied successes” artist and assistant can realize.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, by way of the consistent grids of the musical score paper, it embeds

associations with the nourishments of music (“its rhythm, structure, beat”) and with personal memories along these lines.⁶⁵

Though quite divergent in tone, medium, and subject matter from the other projects I’ve already presented (and it isn’t digital), from the perspective of plural reading, *10 AM* is highly germane. Reading the Gallenkuş assemblies and the “woman yelling at cat” meme in conjunction with Bourgeois’s work, it is apparent that, for all their blatant dissimilarities, they nevertheless carry important family resemblances. One of these resemblances already in play is the expressive strategy of media assembly. Another is more elusive and particular: the use of the hand as a consequential constituent. In the Gallenkuş juxtapositions, there are hands that grasp for love (adults and children), hands that are absent (the child in tears beneath the child laughing), and hands associated with peril (the hand beneath the glacier or near the mine). In the meme, there are both the very present and forceful pointing hand and the barely recognized hand behind the cat. In addition, in at least one iteration, the parody of *The Last Supper*, there are the multiple gesturing hands as rendered by both Leonardo da Vinci and *The Real Housewives*. Finally, in the Bourgeois piece, there is an equally playful and intensive engagement with the idea of hands as bodily constituents that take on certain positions and that can come into intimate relation (and conflict) with those of others. A more conservative perspective would dismiss these as merely coincidental or unimportant overlaps. Taking the time to dwell in the possibility of a subfamily, however, one can recognize that these are all instances in which constituent hands draw the eye, indicate human presence, intensify the qualities of expressivity, and serve as sources of tension and power. This much could (and should, for my part) be interesting to practitioners who ponder aesthetic possibilities. But the question from the perspective of plural reading is whether and how it might be valuable to pursue this subfamily further for the sake of understanding and critique, perhaps finding a vein of aesthetic or activist ore, or running into conceptual questions that deserve further study.

One way to do this is to look outward to other projects that bear these same family resemblances: the cultural form of assembly and the expressive use of gathered hands. Not surprisingly, what Ryan M. Milner and Whitney Phillips dub the “ambivalent internet”⁶⁶

A Glossary of Gestures for Critical Discussion

As Observed By Jasmine Johnson & Alice May Williams with help from MoreUtopia!



The Critical Whirl. 'I've read too much Marx and I can't get my words out'

Circle hand clockwise in a small but rapid motion towards the audience.

Accelerate and repeat until idea unpacked.



The Backhand Slap. 'I know I've said it before but I will say it again'

Slap dominant hand into non-dominant hand.

Use as a reinforcing gesture when critical opponent seems unresponsive.



The Point.

Extend forefinger in a controlled but emphatic manner.

Use to direct everyone's gaze towards a particular individual or object.



The Shelf Sweep.

Begin with both hands at right hand shoulder. Sweep across the top shelf of imaginary bookcase. When level with left shoulder, make sharp rotation of wrists and sweep across lower shelf.

Use when explaining hierarchies.



Picking Up Small Ideas.

Reach down towards imaginary pile of sand, pinch a small amount, lift with closed fingers and return to original position. Repeat upto 3 times. Optional extra; present idea to others in palm of hand.

Use only when seated in front of an audience.



Flexing Academic Muscle. 'I'm testing out my research in front of a live audience'

Bounce from side to side on imaginary hand trampolines. Repeat until academic muscle is exhausted.

Use when taking idea out of original context and placing it somewhere else.

Figure I.7. Jasmine Johnson and Alice May Williams with MoreUtopia!, *A Glossary of Gestures for Critical Discussion*, 2013. Screenshot, September 2020 (criticalhandgestures.tumblr.com).

is rife with the latter. One example is a delightful use of Tumblr. A pair of artists present “A Glossary of Gestures for Critical Discussion”; the looping GIFs of emphatic hand gestures (in conjunction with their clever captions) make for a satirical ferment while nevertheless speaking to an attentiveness to academic habits in all their specificity and eccentricity (Figure I.7).⁶⁷ Several years later, meme producers adapted a longtime schoolyard gimmick in which you trick someone into looking at the “O.K.” circle you make with your thumb and the index finger. Somehow this game ended up being coopted by white supremacists, so that in 2019, a memetic rendition of the first-ever imaging of a black hole as the universe tricking us

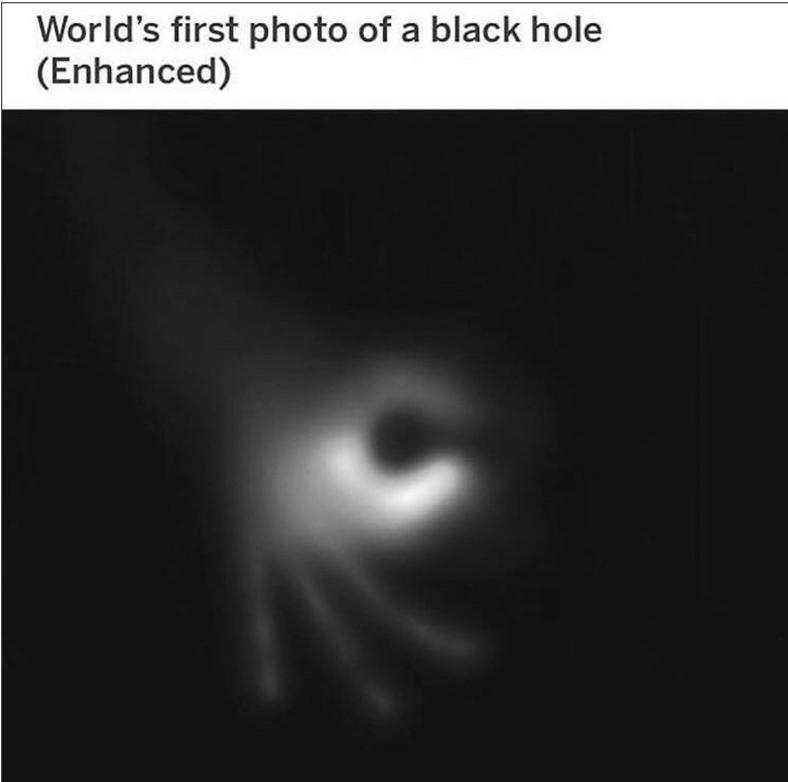


Figure I.8. A playful meme about the imaging of a black hole (apparently unintentionally) cites a violent one. Anonymous. Collected in 2019.

all into seeing the circle becomes tainted by an apparently unwelcome citation of networks of racist ideology (Figure I.8).⁶⁸ As a final example, on the now-ascendant (as of 2022) platform TikTok, several among the never-ending stream of memetic “challenges” invite people to do things with their hands for the camera. In one case, users flash one or two hands in imitation of a sequence of hand emojis, either trying to match what’s already been done or creatively adding new variations on the theme. In another, very different challenge, users hold up fingers as they listen to TikToker Kenya Bundy read twelve negative scenarios regularly dealt with by Black Americans on the basis of race. If you have any fingers remaining by the end, then you have privilege (Figure I.9).



Figure I.9. Fingers configure privilege on the TikTok account @allisonholkerboss in 2020.

A pluralist approach welcomes the considerable discomfort that emerges here. On the one hand, you get that sinking feeling that you've merely glommed on to some arbitrary feature. On the other hand, you find that there is good reason to persist: that the very feeling of trouble is (one hopes) a sign of potential. It is not just because the big picture of assembly opens. It is also because interesting questions unfold. What can assembled hands say that assembled faces cannot? When are hands sites of interconnection?⁶⁹ When are they sites of differentiation? To what degree do smartphones and emojis kill the eccentricity of gesture? To what degree do visual assemblies save them? And, finally, how might these different uses of hands point to something much broader about how humans index and count with their fingers, or as Benjamin Peters put it, "have digital tools built right into their hands"? Peters elaborates: "By pointing or orienting ourselves to different objects, our digits have long manipulated the world around us. This is nothing new: what is new is the commanding degree and scale to which, in the past seventy years or so, trivially large reservoirs of computing power have begun to be consolidated in the hands of increasingly powerful data-rich institutions—corporation and state alike—and much less so self-organizing groups of people. Socioeconomic privilege continues to scale with digital privileges."⁷⁰ From hands in an analog studio to hands as vectors of digital privilege, plural reading relies on exactly these kinds of uncertain, speculative, and multiplicative cascades of inquiry.

Lest it seem as though I am claiming plural reading carries no risks or limits, let me emphasize that it does. Among the major risks is that one ends up leaving out significant aspects of the projects and practices analyzed. As certain family resemblances are highlighted, other distinguishing features can fall to the side. In some cases, such as a humorous dance craze, this will not be particularly concerning, but in other circumstances one risks doing a kind of intellectual violence, acting as though cultural and contextual specificities are not important, or effectively stripping a given project of its felt meanings or political force. Another risk is more general. It is possible that hyperinductive analysis can end up performing and endorsing what Ariella Aisha Azoulay calls an "imperial right." One assumes an entitlement to freely select, decontextualize, and reclassify—a forced removal of existing categories in favor of newly imposed ones.⁷¹

There is no easy answer to these problems. Perhaps they can be partly mitigated by means of the habits and orientations of the inquiry, including a consistent reticence around selecting examples about which one cannot pretend to know much or, more importantly, that do not “want” such study, or through the selection of examples that themselves embody anti-imperial, antireductionist commitments. For my part, I have sought to point to the limitations of my analyses (including the limits of my knowledge) while nevertheless insisting on the relevance of my selections.

Among the most important of my guiding criteria in these selections is a commitment to touch upon as many digital and non-digital mediums as possible (thus showing the reach and flexibility of assembly). Another is a desire to mix quite canonical and well-known examples (like the Bosch painting or memes that went “mainstream”) with projects and practices that have not yet received the attention they deserve. Still another has been the overarching argument about the ambivalent powers of assembly in relation to violence and injustice. And yet one more criterion is a desire to suggest a potential history of assembly. It is a *supposition* of this book (i.e., not an argument it pursues in depth) that assembly well precedes the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. (As is evident, my historical and theoretical scope is largely limited to European, North American, and English-language contexts.) I have been further convinced of the merit of this idea by the handful of scholars who point to projects from the eighteenth century in which the expressive power of configuration proves integral. For instance, John O. Havard proposes that the remarkable satirical cartoon *Political Electricity; or An Historical & Prophetical Print in the Year 1770* could be seen as an instance of expressive assembly.⁷² Even more suggestively, a book that will be published during production of this one, Kelly Wisecup’s *Assembled for Use*, gathers understudied examples of early Indigenous American “compilations.” For Wisecup, these compilations, which took forms as varied as medical recipes, poetry scrapbooks, and vocabulary lists, all involved “juxtaposing and recontextualizing textual excerpts into new relations and meanings” and served to “remake the very forms that defined” their writers’ “bodies, belongings, and words as ethnographic evidence.”⁷³

Plural reading is the most effective means I have found to evade the dominance of oversubscribed (but obviously important) cultural

forms while also providing critically flexible typologies of the potentials and pitfalls of assembly in response to social and ecological oppression and harm. It is my strong sense that, as digital and networked technologies increasingly blur what were only provisional lines between media (and between life, culture, and technology), and as more and more voices and perspectives enter planetary-scale experiments in cultural forms, the need for plural reading will become all the more pronounced. Plural reading might fail at times, but without it we won't adequately meet the remarkable heterogeneity and citational ferment of the internet era. We will also overlook much needed tactics and countertactics in the daily maelstrom of mediated democratic struggle.

Through the Lens of Assembly

A Theory of Assembly joins books like *The Age of Sharing* and *The Ecology of Attention* in placing front and center a single, essential concept: *assembly*.⁷⁴ So far, I have emphasized how assembly names a distinct cultural phenomenon. That phenomenon is an increasingly prevalent expressive strategy set apart by the visible and intensive use of compilation and configuration; it is especially open to analysis through the method of plural reading; and it is of particular (though not always positive) consequence in response to events and conditions of destruction and injustice.

The last thing I must discuss before launching into the chapters is something else assembly names, which is *a way of looking at the world*. In many respects, this way of looking matches up with the concept of assembly as I have so far presented it. That is to say, if you look through this book's "lens" of assembly, then your attention will be drawn to expressive projects that do not characteristically narrate or represent the world, but instead rearrange it. In another important sense, however, this book's lens of media assembly tends to at least partly (and sometimes thoroughly) scramble that more stable perspective on cultural and communicative life. It does so by consistently bringing other things into view: other features, other scales, and most notably, *other forms of assembly and assemblage*.

I can best clarify this more complicated dimension of the book's theoretical project through a reworked version of this now commonplace metaphor of the conceptual lens. The usual idea with this

metaphor is relatively straightforward. Something of intellectual interest is seen in finer detail by way of a certain governing concept. Researchers might, with a meaning closer to the literal, characterize given research projects as efforts to reinterpret something (such as environmentalism) through a particular lens, or they might employ a similar language for certain turns of mind, speaking to shifts in perception, a “lens switch.” At the same time, the metaphor of the lens also suggests something akin to a “point of view.”⁷⁵ Researchers are adopting certain perspectives, vocabularies, and commitments over others.

Although the technology of the lens is rarely discussed (the term comes from the Latin for “lentil”), the implicit notion in these cases tends toward that of a magnifying glass, as in a single piece of “glass or other transparent substance with curved sides for concentrating or dispersing light rays.”⁷⁶ But it turns out that actual lenses are almost always plural in nature. Telescopic lenses, smartphone lenses, single-lens reflex (SLR) camera lenses—quite a few things we imagine as discrete lenses are, in fact, made up of structured arrays of several simpler lenses or “lens elements” (Figure I.10).⁷⁷ In other words, lenses are collections or arrangements of lenses. Typically, the lens elements that make up these arrangements align in groups, filtering and focusing light waves in particular ways for the receptive surface, whether an emulsion or a charged couple device. As different blends and different positionings of lenses yield different visual and informational results, what is at stake is often an improvement in image quality, but there can be other reasons to favor one arrangement over another, such as a preferred type of image for consumer cameras or a certain kind of visual data necessary for research purposes.

It is also possible to refuse these more normative approaches to lens assembly. Among the more suggestive demonstrations of this possibility is a lens that is not unidirectional but multidirectional, as in the north-south-east-west camera built by the artist Aïm Düelle Lüschi. Instead of a clearer, more beautiful, more comprehensive, or more useful image, the multidirectional lens yields a melding of four distinct views in a single, enigmatic exposure. As Azoulay emphasizes, these exposures “address the groundless effort to violently split, and later allegedly seam together, one geographical and urban unit according to national and ethnic lines.”⁷⁸



Figure I.10. As revealed by a split-open SLR camera, a lens can be (and often is) an assembly of lens elements. Kārlis Dambrāns, “Panasonic camera, IFA 2015.” Cropped. CC BY 2.0.

In employing the lens of media assembly, this book tends toward this more open-ended and indeed plural idea of a lens that comes from the technology itself. This takes shape in two key ways. For one, my approach to given contexts and problems will consistently undergo switches, as though media assembly’s internal lens arrangements have been adjusted on the fly. Quite often these switches will be from artifact to practice, moving from what something *is* (like an ark built after disaster or a sequence of climate change memes) to what those things involve or yield (like an arts nonprofit in the same area as the ark), or to how their effects stretch out over time and place (like the effect of the persistent “drip” of these climate change memes). Another kind of switch involves scale, moving from a vision of assemblies made by individuals (like a GIF), to things made by distributed participants (like a digital environmental justice atlas), to endeavors undertaken in widely dispersed and not always intentional fashion (like the distributed mediation of the Mexico–U.S. border). Whether an appreciation for the effects of a process or an attention to multiple scales rather than

just one, the virtue of this malleability is a considerably expanded account of how assembly-based efforts are effective and consequential. Assembly matters not only for what it expresses but also for what it enables and enacts across time and place. One other advantage of these switches is a responsiveness to the circumstances of networked life. The smallest actions can have the biggest effects (and the largest actions can have the least effect). Practices of digital assembly matter and mutate across multiple orders and registers. The point is not that it is wrong to focus on assembly in the sense of media assemblies, like viral comparisons or thematic lists. It is that, given the complexity and richness of art and media, there are always other lens configurations one ought to consider using. One of these is a shift from static artifact to in-process practice. Another is the switching of scales.

A second, more “plural” habit of this book’s lens of media assembly might be phrased thus: I open the lens of media assembly to creative recombination with other conceptual lenses; I do so to see and think something better, differently, or anew. The lenses with which I combine media assembly are quite varied, from analogy and folksonomy to structural violence and intersectionality. At the same time, there are certain cognate lenses that prove especially enabling throughout the book. They fall into two broad categories: on the one side, theories of assemblage and, on the other, theories of political and popular assembly.

Lenses under the umbrella of assemblage reach back at least as far as the wonderfully roving (if also sometimes frustratingly opaque) 1980 book *A Thousand Plateaus*. There Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari defy more dominant Cartesian and Newtonian precepts by suggesting that the world is replete with something called “agencement,” a term that is most often (and somewhat deceptively) translated into English as “assemblage.”⁷⁹ Assemblages are not a type of art in this case.⁸⁰ Rather, they are certain kinds of entities in the world. They are porous aggregates; these aggregates are made up of evolving, heterogeneous elements and relationships among those elements; and the aggregates exist, operate, and transform across multiple scales.⁸¹

Manuel DeLanda provided the first full-fledged explication of this novel concept. According to DeLanda, the most accessible example of an “assemblage of heterogeneous elements” is a particular

kind of martial “whole,” one which is “composed of a human being, a fast riding horse, and a missile-throwing weapon.”⁸² This is the most accessible example because it clearly cuts across “entirely different realms of reality: the personal, the biological, and the technological.” Other assemblages, much larger in scale and much more varied in character, from a prison to a city to an entire nation, likewise cut across different realms of acting and becoming, but with dramatically more elements, dynamics, and relationships in play.

Over the past several decades, numerous scholars have built on these complex (and often elusive) theoretical foundations. Among the many, many examples one could cite are: Jane Bennett arguing that a power grid is an assemblage exhibiting a kind of agency⁸³; Hayles on the power of “cognitive assemblages” (from automated personal assistants to the entire internet) that act as “arrangement[s] of systems, subsystems, and individual actors through which information flows, effecting transformations through the interpretive activities of cognizers operating upon the flows”⁸⁴; or finally Jasbir Puar reconceiving a host of interrelated phenomena—terrorists and terrorism, the “homonationalism” of states, the turbaned body, the theoretical apparatus that pursues these concepts, sexuality—as evolving, mutating, dynamic aggregates of elements.⁸⁵ Still other examples likewise assert a conceptual reworking of supposedly stable things as unruly, in-process, malleable arrangements, finding assemblage a useful term for phenomena as varied as melancholy, climate-change policy, Bollywood, tourism, and the brain.⁸⁶ Are these thinkers all using the *same* lens of assemblage? My analogy suggests a more nuanced approach. We assess how different elements are used and fused, making sense of the concepts’ internal “arrangements” while also pointing to a consistent way of seeing: the view to heterogeneous aggregates.

Along a different and more recently established track, several theories of assembly share this emphasis on heterogeneous aggregates (or what Hayles calls “a provisional collection of parts in constant flux”⁸⁷), but they tend to find their primary departure point in the concrete fact of people gathering and organizing toward political ends.⁸⁸ In some sense, this has meant paralleling theories of assemblage by emphasizing plurality, relationality, and connection over individuality and discreteness. But it has also meant retaining a focus on the things that cultural and especially

political actors do (or struggle to do) under limiting and sometimes hostile conditions. One influential strand of such assembly-based thought is found in the work of Bruno Latour, who, in collaboration with an array of artists and writers, asks what kinds of political assemblies are possible and effective, how techniques for representation support (and sometimes undo) these assemblies, and whether gatherings of people (and objects) can ever manage to successfully negotiate the spaces between their mutual concerns and “contradictory attachments.”⁸⁹ In both Elise Danielle Thorburn’s 2012 account and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s subsequent book, to assemble is to risk an often unsuccessful political organizational mode that mortal creatures already do and might yet do better.⁹⁰ For these thinkers, assembly feeds into more horizontal and emergent forms of organizing; it even has the potential to provide “the organisational terrain for the common politics to come.” In Judith Butler’s 2015 “performative theory of assembly,” likewise inspired by the spate of political gatherings in the early 2010s (and a key influence on the present book), to assemble is to engage in a relational, expressive, and manifestly plural “performative enactment” that requires the alignment of vulnerable bodies in time and space.⁹¹ To assemble is thus also to actualize the potential for affinity and cooperation across sometimes seemingly insurmountable degrees of difference, quite often in shared opposition to conditions of what Butler calls the “differential distribution of precarity.”⁹² Such assembly can also be, as Jonas Staal puts it, the occasion for “the creation of spaces in which we perform the popular to compose our understanding of being a people differently” in the mode of “assemblism.”⁹³

As a final example, in the work of Jason Frank, these more concept-driven visions of assembly give way to a historically situated investigation of the enduring importance of popular assembly in Europe and the United States. For Frank, there has long been a political aesthetic problem: unlike the sovereign monarch, the “people” are not consolidated or visualizable in a single figure; instead, “the people must see themselves assembled in order to feel their power.”⁹⁴ By pursuing both spontaneous and planned acts of “collective staging,” whether in protests, rallies, barricades, or insurgencies, aggregates of people make themselves “visible and tangible as a collective entity possessing a creative and sovereign

will.”⁹⁵ The often energetic and even “sublime” act of gathering toward political ends is an engine of democratic imagination; it remains “one of the principle, dynamic, and most historically persistent sites of this form of political enactment.”⁹⁶ Meanwhile, whether through lithographs, photographs, paintings, or other media, “images of peoplehood” serve to “mediate the people’s relationship to their own political empowerment—how they understand themselves to be a part of and act *as* a people.”⁹⁷

When I survey these heuristic summaries through this book’s lens of media assembly, I *partly* see things with which I have quite a bit of agreement (such as the causal force of multi-scalar assemblages like cities in the DeLanda sense, or Hayles’s emphasis on interpretation and decision-making, or the expressive and performative functions of popular assemblies). I *partly* see things about which I have questions (such as the potential overinvestment in popular assemblies as positive and effective political forms, or the paradoxical emphasis on the expressive strategy of representation in certain cases, or what appears to be an unnecessary tendency to see assemblages as everywhere and fundamental rather than particular). But what I *primarily* see are terms, ideas, convictions, and ultimately ways of looking and listening with which to come into conversation and combination.⁹⁸ And, thus, with respect to the world of theories based in assemblage, for instance, *A Theory of Assembly* takes ample inspiration from the basic commitment to recognize arrangements of heterogeneous elements on their terms, *as* arrangements, and to think through the interactions of multiple scales. The book also makes tactical use of a distinct lens element from the work of Deleuze and Guattari: “deterritorialization.” Without this notion, the museum exhibition I address in chapter 2, for example, would be too much given over to assessment in terms of story and history. With this notion, I can better analyze its drive to disaggregate histories of extractive colonization and creative destruction in California through acts of aesthetic and interpretive recombination. I can also turn to other, more radical projects in this vein.

To put this all a different way, like theorists of assemblage, I am interested in how the figuration of assembly/assemblage proves enabling, whether for untested kinds of analytical comparisons, for thinking in terms of process and arrangement, or for the blurring

of material and subjective acts and dynamics. At the same time, although I find “assemblage” compelling, I do not use it to name the cultural form in question because the concept misses the sense of purposeful organization, because it risks obscuring the roles of individual and group agency so important to projects of activism and repair, and because it does not as readily bridge the analog and the digital. By contrast, “assembly” has the virtue of evoking both the fleshly gathering of people and the orderly construction of machines.⁹⁹ The term thus primes us to observe the algorithmic and the archival as much as the authorial and the artistic, and the ability to think across these spheres proves especially valuable in the contexts that animate this book, from art, visual culture, and memes to disaster and slow and structural violence.

With respect to the world of popular and political assembly, the relationships between this book’s lens and the ones found there are more numerous. For one thing, *A Theory of Assembly* makes evident the degree to which media assembly has several significant roles to play in both the exercise and afterlife of political gathering. (This is a lens of media assembly before, at, of, and after political assembly.) Media assemblies can act as spurs toward such physical assemblies. People assembling together can make visual and other kinds of media assemblies, such as memory quilts, free libraries, and digital archives, that reflect and remember the ongoing work of social and political convening (or that work to communicate the demands of an assembly of people without singling out a leader, as in the signatures arranged in circles known in English as “round robins” or in Japanese as “umbrella-style joint covenants”¹⁰⁰). Finally, during actual in-person gatherings, there is expressive power in stances and actions that involve gathering and configuring bodies, combining and aligning voices, relating and arranging gestures.

One of the most poignant (but basically entirely forgotten) examples I have encountered along these latter lines had fishing boats rather than people as its primary media constituents. In July 1989, several months after the grounding of the *Exxon Valdez*, at the time one of the worst petroleum disasters in history, a group called F.I.S.H. (Frustrated Independent Fish Harvesters) attempted to stop an oil tanker from docking at a terminal near the Kenai River in southern Alaska. With the salmon harvest devastated after not just one but multiple oil spills, the members of F.I.S.H. sought to bring

attention to their ongoing plight and the risk of further pollution events from the lack of accountability. The power of this action was, of course, the sheer physical vulnerability involved, not just the boats against the tanker, but also the local fishing industry (or one could say the local fishing “assemblage” in the Deleuze/DeLanda sense) against the global petroleum one. The power was also the expressive and disseminatable impact of the flotilla as a kind of media artifact. Together these boats made a provisional, moving assembly that embodied a refusal to accept the status quo. Individual photographs, including an especially striking one that shows wakes parallel to each other and to the long tanker itself, offered some virtual afterlife to this ephemeral configuration (Figure I.11).¹⁰¹ Then, some twenty years later, a different kind of media assembly emerged that would both extend and rework the activist labors of F.I.S.H. A library and archive entity called ARLIS (Alaska Resources Library and Information Services) digitized a set of slides that included these photographs (which were taken by photographers contracted by the Governor of Alaska to document the spill, the cleanup effort, and related events). That batch of digitized photographs was then uploaded to the photo sharing platform Flickr (Plate 2). Ever since, should one somehow chance upon these images (and it is not likely that one would), one will find the marine demonstration as one assembly among many, situated between a batch of photos of a man fixing a fishing net and another that documents a second resistant flotilla, this time in Prince William Sound in September 1989. (Another blockade, in April of 1993, succeeded in suspending oil transportation over several days.¹⁰²) One act of assembly begets another.

A second version of a hybrid media-political lens of assembly shows how media assemblies can be construed as instances of popular and political assembly in themselves. (This is a lens of media assembly as political assembly.) This notion finds a departure point in Butler’s crucial insight that “forms of assembly already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make.”¹⁰³ “Showing up, standing, breathing, moving, standing still, speech, and silence are all aspects of a sudden assembly,” Butler writes. How do we get from assembly-based enactment in streets and at oil terminals to assembly-based enactment on canvas and in silico? We see that assemblies perform meaningful signifying work prior to



Figure I.11. “Aerial of commercial fishing boats of the Frustrated Independent Fish Harvesters (F.I.S.H.) attempting to blockade an oil tanker from docking, protesting oil spills that were preventable” at the Kenai River (Cook Inlet) on July 20, 1989. From a digitized slide collection of Alaska Resources Library and Information Services (ARLIS) as posted to Flickr.

and alongside what their words and images explicitly say, show, or enable. Put a different way, the very fact of the assembly’s appearance and circulation is itself an “expressive action” or “politically significant event.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, when audiences encounter artifacts and practices of media assembly, they encounter not only ideas, impressions, and information but also performative assertions, including the power (and the call) to intervene in public conversation, mediation, and memory, however thoughtfully, powerfully, or routinely.

Carrying forth in this speculative manner, it seems possible that, in certain cases, such as media assemblies produced or undertaken in response to violence (and here I am echoing Azoulay’s concept of the civil contract of photography), assemblies do more than perform expressive actions; they also act like democratic intersections, proposing implicit and provisional polities or citizenries.¹⁰⁵ In these cases, nominally aesthetic uses of assembly, such as the juxtaposition of multiple characters or perspectives, the alignment of

faces or places, or the architectures of selection and arrangement, conjure a provisional and invisible gathering of relational citizens across time and space. Perhaps these assembling expressions can act as provocations—however momentary, however flawed—toward future convening, whether mediated or live, around the ecological and social violence in question or around still other events and histories.

Finally, one can consider those moments when political assemblies don't just include media assemblies, but are themselves involved in and expressive of much larger ones. (This is a lens of political assembly as media assembly.) In the Conclusion of this book, I will point to one such case: the meme-spiked storming of the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021. Suffice it to say for now that the fused lens of media and popular assembly anticipates exactly these kinds of occurrences, when the persistent assembling and disassembling that occur through social media explode into events where the difference between the actual and the mediated no longer applies, but where, nevertheless, blood is spilled and democracy is further eroded. Crucially, this book also anticipates the reverse, in which the blurring of popular and media assembly is the means of profound reflection, reinvention, and repair.

A Summary of What Follows

A Theory of Assembly begins by establishing a framework for assembly, which is the focus of chapter 1, "What Is Assembly?" This framework takes shape in two phases. In the first, the goal is a workable definition of assembly. It is one thing to gather, as I have done here, a sequence of related examples; it is another to systematically map the features that set this cultural form apart from others. I do so with the help of Rick Altman's theorization of narrative through its characteristic materials, activities, and drive. I argue that this triad applies to assembly: its materials are constituents and positions; its activities are selection and configuration; and there is a drive to perceive and interpret (and, especially in the digital era, to pursue and participate in) assembly. The second phase of theorizing assembly involves several elaborations. Assembly is more than a type of media artifact; it is also something people do. Assembly is not confined to individual media artifacts; it can take

place at widely varying scales. Finally, assembly need not center on a single artifact; it can involve vast networks of objects and interactions. The chapter closes by addressing an idea one might assume is implicit to a theory of assembly: that “everything is a remix.” I suggest that this notion (however well-intentioned) is inaccurate and even harmful, emphasizing histories of cultural appropriation.

Like all the remaining chapters, chapter 2, “Art, Assembly, and the Museum,” brings the lens of assembly to bear on a particular sphere of cultural production, in this case the uneasily distinguished domain of art. First drawing on Serra’s *Verb List* for orientation and then addressing likely major objections against including assembly in art history and theory, the bulk of the chapter’s contribution turns on a critical typology of art as assembly. My contention is that at least two key dynamics distinguish what assembly can do in art. Assembly-based art can analogize; it can also reconstitute. Of key interest here is the capacity for art and curatorial and art-centered activist practices to link what would otherwise remain separate. Equally important is their capacity to shape new (or newly recovered) configurations of perceptual, social, and political life. The chapter closes with a discussion of art and museums in relation to carbonization and decarbonization in the era of climate emergency.

Chapter 3, “Memes, Assembly, and the Internet,” shifts the conversation from the fine, slow, and enduring to the popular, quick, and ephemeral. Following a discussion of the difficulty of defining “meme,” this chapter parallels the opening one in adopting a two-phase approach. In the first phase, I argue that among the most significant and novel practices yielded by memes is the assembly-based practice of rapid reclassification I call “expressive folksonomy.” In the second phase, I zoom out to consider not just one subpractice, but the entire history of this sprawling cultural domain. As things stand, there are numerous broad scholarly frames for memes, including folklore, street art, and conversation. While recognizing the value of these other frames, I argue for one that is both more particular and more encompassing: hyperdistributed media assembly. Among the key affordances of this reframing is attention to the remarkable capacity of memes for performing and encouraging antidemocratic communication and action. The

chapter closes by proposing an even broader and more speculative application of the lens of assembly. The expressive strategy, far from being confined to a select set of artifacts and practices, is a distinguishing property of the internet era.

Although the fourth and fifth chapters continue to apply assembly to particular domains, they shift the focus from broad cultural genres to enduring social problems. In chapter 4, “Generative Assembly after Disaster,” the enduring problem is the dissonance between what is necessary and valuable from media and culture after disaster and what ends up actually being produced. As was tragically plain during Katrina, which is the focus of the chapter, prevailing conditions of mediation and remembrance tend to favor variously reductive, racialized, and biased framings over and against nuance and attention to differential violence. Taking stock of the remarkable range of cultural projects that emerged in the wake of this unnatural disaster, from the viral juxtaposition cited above to a Kara Walker exhibition to an online memory bank, I argue that among the most powerful means of intervening in these prevailing conditions is the practice of “generative assembly.” This practice characteristically involves seizing on the transformative power in recombining the data and media of disaster and recovery. The chapter closes with two very different reflections, first on the broad field of distributed assembly after Katrina, and second on the “configural” nature of Walter Benjamin’s famous catastrophe-centered reading of the “angel of history” and Jesse McCarthy’s subsequent reidentification of the angel with a monumental installation by Walker.

Chapter 5, “The Powers and Perils of Media Assembly,” turns from the visible extremes of sudden, major disasters to the oft-ignored realities of slow and structural violence. In line with the broader tendency discussed throughout the book, dominant assumptions around cultural responses to such violence tend to dwell on the forms of narrative and representation (and this is true of Rob Nixon’s influential account of slow violence). However, some of the most influential projects undertaken in response to nonsudden, routine, and distributed violence tend to rely, either predominantly or to a significant degree, on the form of assembly. From “conceptual reassembly” to “thematic counter-mapping” to “memetic drip,” citizens, activists, artists, scholars, and designers use assembly to help forestall (or sometimes help occlude or justify) the persistent

facts and effects of poisoning, debilitation, and other forms of environmental, social, and technological harm. The chapter closes with a discussion of the strengths and limits of the concept of slow violence in an era when both slow and “fast” violence continue to disproportionately impact Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color—and thus the need for “inventive vigilance.”

The book concludes by reframing the power and pervasiveness of assembly in the digital era. Not only is assembly ever more widely practiced, it is also increasingly ambivalent. This doesn't mean that the practice is somehow undecided or wishy-washy. Rather, assembly's increasing capacity to support progressive and emancipatory causes coincides with an increasing capacity to work against those very efforts. The events of January 6, 2021, were an especially harrowing example of the pernicious potentials in the form. Not only did uses of assembly help make the event thinkable, but the event also itself constituted a kind of “critical opalescence” of assembly; neither strictly physical nor entirely virtual, the event chaotically fluctuated between popular assembly and media assembly. The conclusion closes by invoking the words of thinkers whose work opposes the premises assembled that day: Toni Morrison, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler. Together these writers point to how forms of reparative assembly can and must work both in spite of and against violent exercises of assembly in the paranoid mode.

At the outset of her 1982 film on the lives of rural women in Senegal, *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen*, Trinh T. Minh-ha offers a brief and intriguing assertion of intention: “I do not intend to speak about,” Trinh says, “just speak nearby.” As Trinh would later clarify, “speaking nearby” is a form of speaking that “does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place,” a form that “reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it.”¹⁰⁶ It is a speaking that is “brief” and “whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition.”

Having had the fortune of taking a class with Trinh, I have long appreciated the notion of speaking nearby, not only for its eloquent evasion of distanced knowing, but also for its recasting of the idea of “about,” this ordinary word now sounding strangely spatial. It was

only in writing this introduction, however, that I felt the weight and the challenge of this intervention's dual emphasis: on the one hand, the supposedly placeless speech about others that can be understood as what *is* happening, and on the other, what *ought* to happen—humble, situated, avowedly interdependent speech near and alongside others. For a long time, the research and writing for this book took place within the confines of my notebooks and electronic devices. Working at this virtual remove, I could maintain the illusion that what was going on when I addressed questions of public violence and environmental and social justice was an exercise of demonstrating how much assembly matters. In other words, I could assume that, although I was acting as though the objects of my inquiry were absent from my speaking place, I was doing so with good intentions and as informed a perspective as I could adopt. In moving to make this work public, however, and in doing so amid the protests and conversations that have followed from the police murder of George Floyd, I confronted the actual, positioned, and necessarily limited aggregate of ideas, references, and choices that sat before me. One shortcoming I noted was the frequency with which I use theoretical concepts from white, male, cisgender artists and theorists as departure points. Another shortcoming was the relation of nonaffiliation I tended to enact in researching and writing about disaster and slow and structural violence. I proceeded as though these things were out there in the world, open to examination, there for me to respond to by way of concept and example, and not phenomena with which my own life, and the structures that make and inform that life, were interlocked.

In seeking to address these aspects of the book, I have worked to revise not just the people and projects cited, but the concerns and critical positions foregrounded.¹⁰⁷ I have also sought the perspectives of writers who occupy a similar set of subject positions and who, to put it bluntly, take the time to address the locations and limitations of their work. Along these lines, one passage, written by Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein for the introduction to their book *Data Feminism*, stood out as especially forceful:

We write as two straight, white women based in the United States, with four advanced degrees and five kids between us. We identify as middle-class and *cisgender*—meaning that our

gender identity matches the sex that we were assigned at birth. We have experienced sexism in various ways at different points of our lives—being women in tech and academia, birthing and breastfeeding babies, and trying to advocate for ourselves and our bodies in a male-dominated health care system. But we haven't experienced sexism in ways that other women certainly have or that nonbinary people have, for there are many dimensions of our shared identity, as the authors of this book, that align with dominant group positions. This fact makes it impossible for us to speak *from experience* about some oppressive forces—racism, for example. But it doesn't make it impossible for us to educate ourselves and then speak about racism and the role that white people play in upholding it. Or to challenge ableism and the role that abled people play in upholding it. Or to speak about class and wealth inequalities and the role that well-educated, well-off people play in maintaining those. Or to believe in the logic of *co-liberation*. Or to advocate for justice through equity.¹⁰⁸

Having sat with this passage and others like it, I find that one partial (but I hope still worthwhile) thing I can do is speak nearby these writers. I write this book as a white, straight, cisgender, stably employed man, father, and husband who arrived in the United States as the son of two white, straight, cisgender, and graduate-educated immigrants from Wales and (apartheid) South Africa. I have not been on the receiving end of sexism, ableism, and racism. Slow and structural violence have not directly impacted my life. I have never lived through a disaster. I do not start my car knowing I could become the next victim of police brutality, nor have I walked the streets of the cities I have called home under the persistent threat of sexual assault. (This list is, of course, incomplete.) Nevertheless, I join D'Ignazio and Klein in the belief that the privileges of my positions, the gaps in my experience, and the inevitable structural complications of my lifeway prescribe rather than preclude participation in the project of resisting the forces and structures of violence and inequity I have had the nonnatural, nonneutral, and fully constructed fortune to avoid. That I have ended up relying on ideas and artworks presented by white scholars and artists with relative frequency while participating in this project, even after efforts at

revision, seems to me to only further reveal the unlearning I (and others in similar positions) need to undergo. In short, I present this book, which is aligned with social and environmental justice causes, and which often attempts to speak near and with projects addressed to those causes, with as full an acknowledgment as I can muster of its situated, privileged, and imperfect nature.

Far from being *the* theory of assembly, this is one among many possible theories, and it is written in hopes of catalyzing further efforts to contest and rework both established hierarchies of cultural form and, to borrow Karen Barad's phrase, "what matters and what is excluded from mattering."¹⁰⁹

Notes

Introduction

1. I'm referring to a story about a neighborhood cat jumping out of an oak tree told by my daughter, Aada, when she was a toddler.

2. I'm referring to an article on striking agricultural laborers published with two photographs, one by Rodrigo Rentería-Valencia, the other by Terray Sylvester; see Carl Segerstrom, "Coronavirus Concerns Revive Labor Organizing," *High Country News*, June 18, 2020, hcn.org/issues/52.7/north-labor-coronavirus-concerns-revive-labor-organizing.

3. I'm thinking of instances of "generative art on the blockchain," as at artblocks.io.

4. Examples of "storycentrism" are legion. It has become "commonplace to describe humans as storytelling animals" (Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis, *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative* [New York: Routledge, 2017], 1). Ken Plummer writes: "As we find the world troubled by failing democracies, authoritarianism and the new digital risk, so it becomes important to think how human beings retain their humanity as narrating animals" (*Narrative Power: The Struggle for Human Value* [Cambridge: Polity, 2019], 108). On narrative as a transmedia form, see Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). I'm not saying claims of storytelling as essential ought to be wholly dismissed, but debated and nuanced, particularly in light of sociotechnical shifts. I appreciate, for instance, Sylvia Wynter's rejoinder to "the West's hitherto secular liberal monohumanist conception of our being human." Wynter speaks to the emergence in Africa of *homo narrans*, "a hybridly auto-instituting, languaging cum storytelling species" (*Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015], 31). Also relevant are debates around anti-narrative stances, as in Tyler Bradway, "Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form," *PMLA* 136, no. 5 (2021): 711–27.

5. My inclusion of representation could strike some as odd. From this vantage, representation isn't so much a cultural form as what underlies any cultural form. But that assumption is historical and rhetorical rather than timeless and ontological. Socrates emphasizes "mimesis" in Plato's *Republic*, and Aristotle frames art as mimesis in his *Poetics* (for translations, see Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994], and Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath [London: Penguin, 1996]). Also see the entries on "mimesis" on The Chicago School of Media Theory website, lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory. Notably, for Wynter, "'the central mechanism at work' in processes of colonization—and even decolonization—'was

and is that of *representation*” (Nandita Sharma, “Strategic Anti-Essentialism: Decolonizing Decolonization” in *Sylvia Wynter*, 169, italics original).

6. See Lev Manovich, “Database as Symbolic Form,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 5, no. 2 (1999): 80–99; Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001); *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow*, ed. Victoria Vesna (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); and N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). Engagements with Manovich’s claim that the digital-era “database” is supplanting narrative are too many to cite. They include mixes of critique and application, as in Hayles, *How We Think*, and as in Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). For earlier uses of “symbolic form,” see Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone, 1997 [originally 1927]), and Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1957 [originally 1928]). Panofsky recalled extending “Ernst Cassirer’s felicitous term to the history of art” (*Perspective*, 40–41). On Cassirer and Panofsky, see Allister Neher, “How Perspective Could Be a Symbolic Form,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 4 (2005): 359–73, and Emmanuel Alloa, “Could Perspective Ever be a Symbolic Form?,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* 2, no. 1 (2015): 51–71. Also relevant is Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

7. See Carolyn Dean, *A Culture of Stone: Inka Perspectives on Rock* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010). Certain examples of *apachita*, or “miniature mountains of stone” (97), can be understood as “representational” because they look like mountains, but to stop there would be to maintain “the Western preference for figural imagery” (44). Dean shows how these artifacts are also “presentational”; they embody—they *are*—mountains (60–61). Also see *De-Westernizing Visual Communication and Cultures: Perspectives from the Global South*, ed. Guo-Ming Chen, Maria Faust, and Thomas Herdin (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020), and Catherine Grant, Dorothy Price, et al., “Decolonizing Art History,” *Art History* 43, no. 1 (2020): 8–66.

8. Another symptom of the dominance of certain cultural forms is reduction. For example, Marco Frascari asserts that “non-trivial” architecture requires storytelling (“An Architectural Good-Life Can Be Built, Explained, and Taught Only through Storytelling” in *Reading Architecture and Culture: Researching Buildings, Spaces and Documents*, ed. Adam Shar [New York: Routledge, 2012], 224–234). Also see Douglas Crimp’s suggestion that “sequential images, regardless of their ambiguity, will inevitably elicit a narrative” in his important catalog essay for “Pictures,” republished in *X-Tra* 8, no. 1 (2005): 17–30.

9. Although I refer to the digital and internet eras in this book with relative fluidity, I acknowledge that they’re not coextensive and that the notion of an “era” is nonneutral. I agree with W. J. T. Mitchell’s call “to exert some pressure on the commonplace notion that we live in a ‘digital age’” (*Image Science*:

Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018], 140). On the politics of time, see Judith Butler, “Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time,” *British Journal of Sociology* 59, no. 1 (2008): 1–23.

10. I use “transmedia” to indicate a phenomenon not confined to any one medium. For Marsha Kinder, it “suggests a deliberate move across media boundaries—whether it’s referring to intertextuality, adaptations, marketing strategies, reading practices or media networks” (“Transmedia Networks,” *Marsha Kinder Legacies*, marshakinder.com/concepts/011.html). Also see *Transmedia Frictions: The Digital, the Arts, and the Humanities*, ed. Marsha Kinder and Tara McPherson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

11. Hayles, *How We Think*, 40. I use the terms “cultural form” and “expressive strategy” interchangeably. For Anne Hartman, cultural forms knit “disparate elements of the social and political fields” (“Doing Things with Poems: Performativity and Cultural Form,” *Victorian Poetry* 41, no. 4 [2003]: 481–90, at 484–485 and 483). Other uses refer to things like hip-hop, television, magazines, sports, Russian rock music, the public, and hosting. Expressive strategy is used for things like religion, parody, education, opera, and allegory. Also relevant are Bernard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), and Liam Cole Young, “Cultural Techniques and Logistical Media,” *M/C Journal* 18, no. 2 (2015), journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/961. Young describes cultural techniques as “the means by which humans and tools assemble basic categories of space, time and being.”

12. As Caroline Levine shows, “form” needn’t only refer to the composition of a cultural object; it can also refer to “all shapes and configurations,” “all ordering principles,” and “all patterns of repetition and difference,” from a poem to a social movement (*Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015]), 3). I join Levine and others in exploring these more flexible uses of the concept. See, for instance, Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). Also relevant is Sianne Ngai’s expanded account of aesthetic categories, all of which “are experiences of a particular kind of form,” in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 23.

13. Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man without a Country* (New York: Random House, 2007), 133.

14. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Visual and Verbal Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 89n9.

15. See *Before-and-After Photography: Histories and Contexts*, ed. Jordan Bear and Kate Palmer Albers (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

16. I use “media artifact” to mean both whole projects and parts of projects. See Yi Zhao’s entry on “artifact,” on the Chicago School of Media Theory website.

17. Melanie Bühler, “(Re)Discovering Art History’s Philosophical Foundations—An Interview with Hanneke Grootenboer,” in *The Transhistorical*

Museum: Mapping the Field, ed. Eva Wittocx, Ann Demeester, Peter Carpreau, Melanie Bühler, and Xander Karskens (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2018), 45.

18. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York: Pantheon, 1960), 286–87.

19. Marta Gili, *Milagros de la Torre: Photographs 1991–2011* (Barcelona: RM, 2012), 128.

20. W. J. T. Mitchell, “Image,” in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. Mark B. N. Hansen and W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 35–48, at 39. The term “firstness” comes from Charles Sanders Peirce, referring to, in Mitchell’s words here, “inherent qualities such as color, texture, or shape that are the first things to strike our senses.” With respect to secondness, Mitchell here notes the “double take that Wittgenstein called ‘the dawning of an aspect.’”

21. Gili, *Milagros de la Torre*, 132.

22. Art can even remake, as Jacques Rancière puts it, “the distribution of capacities and incapacities” (*The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott [New York: Verso, 2009], 49). Davide Panagia casts Rancière’s writing in assembly-like terms, saying it aims not so much to present a definitive argument as to “display an arrangement of perception and sensation” [*Rancière’s Sentiments* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2018), 15].

23. Aine Cane and Shana Lebowitz, “26 Signs You’re a Great Boss, Even If It Doesn’t Feel Like It,” *Business Insider*, October 16, 2019, [businessinsider.com/signs-you-are-a-good-boss-2017-6](https://www.businessinsider.com/signs-you-are-a-good-boss-2017-6); A. C. Lura, “Top 10 Bloody Histories Behind Common Surgeries,” *Listverse*, March 12, 2020, listverse.com/2020/03/12/top-10-bloody-histories-behind-common-surgeries.

24. I draw this metaphor from Maria Evangelatou, who speaks to the kaleidoscopic potential of “continuous transformations in the eyes of different people” (*A Contextual Reading of Ethiopian Crosses through Form and Ritual: Kaleidoscopes of Meaning* [Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias, 2018], 338).

25. Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists: An Illustrated Essay*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Rizzoli, 2009).

26. Alan Liu, *Friending the Past: The Sense of History in the Digital Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 169–72.

27. Eco, *Infinity of Lists*, 321. Eco characterizes chaotic enumeration as the “delight in introducing the absolutely heterogeneous.”

28. Snyder’s list recalls asyndeton and parataxis. Words and phrases sit side by side without coordinating clauses or subordinating conjunctions.

29. artandfeminism.org.

30. André Brock Jr. speaks to this paradox in his book on “distributed Blackness”; it was inspired by “millions of Black people interacting through networked devices . . . at once separate and conjoined,” what he thinks of as the “online aggregation and coherence of Blackness online, absent Black bodies” (*Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* [New York: New York University Press, 2020], 1).

31. Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press), xiii.

32. On the way assembled bodies say things “even if they stand silently,” see Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 18.

33. See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).

34. Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (New York: Wiley, 2019), 83.

35. Trevor Paglen, “Invisible Images (Your Pictures Are Looking at You),” *The New Inquiry*, December 8, 2016, thenewinquiry.com/invisible-images-your-pictures-are-looking-at-you; Joanna Zylińska, *Nonhuman Photography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2017).

36. Manovich, *Language of New Media*, 218.

37. I note the potential to connect this thought with theoretical investigations of relation, as in Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997 [originally 1990]).

38. My thanks to Brock Stuessi for introducing me to *Over the Edge* and the film *How Radio Isn't Done* (2017).

39. Hayles, *How We Think*, 176, 182.

40. Hayles, 176.

41. In the eighteenth century, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing asserted the need to conceptually separate poetry and painting (Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön* [1766], trans. Edward Allen McCormick [New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1984]). Clement Greenberg argued for what has become known as “medium specificity” (“Modernist Painting,” Forum Lectures [Washington, D.C.: Voice of America, 1960]). The concept has been taken up by numerous critics, including Rosalind E. Krauss, who sees a commitment to the features and histories of given mediums and “technical supports” as essential, enabling artists to avoid complicity with flows of images and capital (*Under Blue Cup* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011]).

42. Distant reading is often attributed to Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (January–February 2000): 54–68. Ted Underwood traces a longer history (“A Genealogy of Distant Reading,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 11, no. 2 [2017], digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/11/2/000317/000317.html). Surface reading emphasizes the “complexity of literary surfaces,” seeking out “patterns that exist within and across texts” (Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 [2009]: 1–21, at 1 and 11). As for “plural reading,” I have found uses in linguistics, briefly with respect to Roland Barthes, and in the work of Daniel Shore, who introduces a computer-aided method for scanning and comparing “sentences plucked from many different texts,” seeking to remain attentive to their “form, use, and context” (“Plural Reading,” Theorizing the Digital Archive, theorizingthedigitalarchivesaa.wordpress.com/about/daniel-shore; see also *Cyberformalism: Histories of Linguistic Forms in the Digital Archive* [Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018]).

43. On philosophical approaches to art through family resemblances, see Noël Carroll, “History and the Philosophy of Art,” *Journal of Philosophy of History* 5 (2011): 370–82. Also see: Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in

Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15, no. 1 (1956): 27–35; Maurice Mandelbaum, "Family Resemblances and Generalizations Concerning the Arts," in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, ed. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (New York: McGraw Hill, 1995), 193–201; Haig Khatchadourian, "Family Resemblances and the Categorization of Works of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28, no. 1 (1969): 79–90; Robert McGregor, "'Art'—Again," *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 4 (1979): 713–23; Carlo Ginzburg, "Family Resemblances and Family Trees: Two Cognitive Metaphors," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 537–56.

44. See Sheldon M. Cohen, "Family Resemblance in the Thirteenth Century," *Philosophy* 48 (1973): 391–94. Several modern thinkers invoke similar concepts, including Friedrich Nietzsche. See Marcin Mizak, "Why Wittgenstein?: Family Resemblances," *Lingua ac Communitas* 15 (2005): 51–70.

45. Organized as a nonlinear sequence of loosely affiliated sections (and written on index cards), *Philosophical Investigations* is a kind of philosophical assembly. Wittgenstein framed philosophy as recombination: "The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (*Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe [Oxford: Blackwell, 1953], §127). Jorge Luis Borges makes a similar contention: "It is venturesome to think that a coordination of words (philosophies are nothing more than that) can resemble the universe very much" ("Avatars of the Tortoise," *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* [New York: New Directions, 1962], 207).

46. Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

47. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 32.

48. Carole L. Palmer distinguishes between shared "basic features" and "variable characteristics" ("Thematic Research Collections," in *A Companion to Digital Humanities*, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth [Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004], 348–65).

49. Wittgenstein's work has been influential on several artists; see, e.g., *Paolozzi and Wittgenstein: The Artist and the Philosopher*, ed. Diego Mantoan and Luigi Perissinotto (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

50. Among the more incisive arguments for an expansive approach to media is Wendy Hui Kong Chun, "Did Somebody Say New Media?" in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, ed. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Anna Watkins Fisher, and Thomas Keenan (New York: Routledge, 2004): 1–10. See also Mark Hansen and W. J. T. Mitchell, "Media" in Hansen and Mitchell, *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, vii–xxii, and John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

51. I appreciate Sarah Kember's observation that her use of the collective pronoun "does not assume or imply any consensus" but is preferable to "more awkward indirect modes of writing" ("Ubiquitous Photography," *Philosophy of Photography* 3, no. 2 [2012]: 331–48, at 331n1).

52. See Robert S. Nelson, "The Slide Lecture, or the Work of Art 'History' in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 3 (2000): 414–34.

53. See Trevor Fawcett, "Visual Facts and the Nineteenth-Century Art

Lecture,” *Art History* 6, no. 4 (1983): 442–60, and Anne Bordeleau, *Charles Robert Cockerell: Architect in Time* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014).

54. Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017), 43.

55. Mark Silverberg refers to family resemblances and a “web of similarities” in *The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Between Radical Art* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 11. Mitchell speaks to an Aristotelian approach that can “link a number of specific entities together by family resemblance” (*Image Science*, 17).

56. Mieke Bal, “Towards a Relational Inter-Temporality,” in Wittcox, De-meester, Carpreau, Bühler, and Karskens *Transhistorical Museum*, 48–63, at 61.

57. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 22.

58. See Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg’s Atlas of Images* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012).

59. Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and the Archive* (London: Routledge, 2007), 11.

60. Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum*, 11.

61. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 146. I should note that Aubrey Anable, Kris Cohen, and Patrick Jagoda also richly engage with Sedgwick’s reparative approach.

62. Olivia Laing, *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency* (New York: Norton, 2020), 4.

63. Leah Singer, “Louise Bourgeois,” an interview of Jerry Gorovoy, *Apartamento 27* (Spring/Summer 2021): 88.

64. Allan Madden, *10 AM IS WHEN YOU COME TO ME* (2006), Tate, November 2014, tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-10-am-is-when-you-come-to-me-al00345.

65. Singer, “Louise Bourgeois,” 102.

66. See Ryan M. Milner and Whitney Phillips, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischievous, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2017).

67. Jasmine Johnson and Alice May Williams in collaboration with MoreUtopia!, “A Glossary of Gestures for Critical Discussion,” criticalhandgestures.tumblr.com.

68. Michael Andor Brodeur, “That Hand Symbol You’re Seeing Everywhere? Not OK,” *Boston Globe*, September 21, 2018, bostonglobe.com/arts/2018/09/20/that-hand-symbol-you-seeing-everywhere-not/6NXpp9PHsEKiunjypIFjDJ/story.html.

69. Campt shares a photograph by her husband, who is Jewish, using his hands to frame a pair of photos of Meyer Gluckman, a Jewish inmate at Breakwater Prison in South Africa who was compelled to display his hands for the camera. For Campt, the gesture transforms the “convict album . . . into what it sought to distance itself from all along: a family album” (*Listening to Images*, 99).

70. Benjamin Peters, “Digital,” in *Digital Keywords: A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture*, ed. Benjamin Peters (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), 93–108, at 105.

71. Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (New York: Verso, 2019).

72. John O. Havard, *Disaffected Parties: Political Estrangement and the Making of English Literature, 1760–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 66–69.

73. Kelly Wisecup, *Assembled for Use: Indigenous Compilation and the Archives of Early Native American Literatures* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2021).

74. My thanks to Ryan M. Milner for pointing out this connection. See Nicholas A. John, *The Age of Sharing* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2017), and Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention*, trans. Barnaby Norman (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2017). My title is partly inspired by a book that approaches aphorisms “transhistorically and transculturally” (Andrew Hui, *A Theory of the Aphorism: From Confucius to Twitter* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019], 21).

75. Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 51.

76. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “lens (n.)”

77. On different types of lenses, see Rudolf Kingslake, *A History of the Photographic Lens* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1989).

78. See Ariella Azoulay, “Aim Deüelle Lüski—Cameras for a Dark Time,” *aperture* (Winter 2010): 34, and Azoulay, *Aim Deüelle Lüski and Horizontal Photography* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014).

79. John Phillips discusses the difficulty of translating the term “assemblage,” which includes senses of arrangement, fitting, and fixing, in “Agencement/Assemblage,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 23, nos. 2–3 (2006): 108–9.

80. On assemblage theory and assemblage art, see Bill Brown, “Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode),” *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 2 (2020): 259–303. On assemblage theory and composition, see *Assembling Composition*, ed. Kathleen Blake Yancey and Stephen J. McElroy (Urbana, Ill.: Conference on College Composition & Communication, 2017).

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

82. DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 68.

83. Jane Bennett, “The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout,” *Public Culture* 17, no. 3 (2005): 445–65.

84. N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 118.

85. See Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), and *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017). Notably, in discussing the turbaned body as an assemblage, Puar presents a comparative assembly that uses Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* (*Terrorist Assemblages*, 190).

86. See Drew Daniel, *The Melancholy Assemblage: Affect and Epistemology in the English Renaissance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); Nick J. Fox and Pam Alldred, “Re-assembling Climate Change Policy: Materialism, Posthumanism, and the Policy Assemblage,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 71,

no. 2 (2020): 269–83; Amit S. Rai, *Untimely Bollywood: Globalization and India's New Media Assemblage* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009); Tony D. Sampson, *The Assemblage Brain: Sense Making in Neuroculture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Christopher Rosin, Angga Dwiartama, Darryl Grant, and Debbie Hopkins, "Using Provenance to Create Stability: State-led Territorialisation of Central Otago as Assemblage," *New Zealand Geographer* 69, no. 3 (2013): 235–48.

87. Hayles, *Unthought*, 117.

88. On technical modes of assembly, see Matthew Hockenberry, "Techniques of Assembly: Logistical Media and the (Supply) Chaîne Opératoire," *Amodern* 9 (April 2020), amodern.net/article/techniques-assembly.

89. See *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 14. Also see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and Martin Müller and Carolin Schurr, "Assemblage Thinking and Actor-Network Theory: Conjunctions, Disjunctions, Cross-Fertilisations," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41, no. 3 (2016): 217–29.

90. Elise Danielle Thorburn, "A Common Assembly: Multitude, Assemblies, and a New Politics of the Common," *Interface* 4, no. 2 (2012): 254–79, at 258; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

91. Butler, *Notes*, 181.

92. Butler, 217.

93. Jonas Staal, "The Speculative Art of Assemblism," *PARSE* 7 (Autumn 2017), parsejournal.com/article/the-speculative-art-of-assemblism. See also Florian Malzacher, *Gesellschaftsspiele: Politisches Theater Heute* (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2020). For a counterargument to assemblism, see Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (New York: Verso, 2016).

94. Jason Frank, *The Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 92.

95. Frank, *Democratic Sublime*, 151.

96. Frank, 7.

97. Frank, 70 (italics original).

98. I mix metaphors in hopes of tempering the lens metaphor's ocular-centrism.

99. "Assemble" has long meant bringing people or things together. The sense of putting together the parts of a machine emerged in the nineteenth century. Other, obsolete (but also conceptually intriguing) uses include having sex and to liken or compare (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "assemble, v.1" and "assemble, v.2").

100. I learned about this practice through a Twitter thread by the historian of modern Japan Nick Kapur (@nick_kapur, mobile.twitter.com/nick_kapur/status/1436911092073058312).

101. See [flickr.com/photos/arlis-reference/4996726871/in/album-72157624387162740](https://www.flickr.com/photos/arlis-reference/4996726871/in/album-72157624387162740).

102. See Joe Hunt, *Mission without a Map: The Politics and Polices of Restoration*

Following the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill (Anchorage: Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council, 2010), 89–90, and Riki Ott, *Not One Drop: Betrayal and Courage in the Wake of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill* (White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green, 2008).

103. Butler, *Notes*, 8.

104. Butler, 18.

105. See Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone, 2008), and *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (New York: Zone, 2015).

106. Nancy N. Chen, “‘Speaking Nearby’: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (1992): 82–91, at 87.

107. I hope other writers can address sonic, kinesthetic, ludic, and other modes of assembly in ways my training does not allow.

108. Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, *Data Feminism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2020), 5 (italics original).

109. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 178.

1. What Is Assembly?

1. Rick Altman, *A Theory of Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 10. All citations in this paragraph are from this page.

2. Ryan Milner uses the term “image meme” for a genre of meme that combines image and text (*The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2016], 39).

3. Raúl Sánchez Cedillo, “The Rest Is Missing: On Constituencies as a Matricial Notion for New Institutions of the Commons,” in *The Constituent Museum: Constellations of Knowledge, Politics and Mediation, A Generator of Social Change*, ed. John Byrne, Elinor Morgan, November Paynter, Aida Sánchez de Serdio, and Adela Železnik (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2018), 31.

4. “Works for the Now, by Queer Artists of Color,” *New York Times Style Magazine*, June 29, 2020, [nytimes.com/2020/06/29/t-magazine/queer-bipoc-artists.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/t-magazine/queer-bipoc-artists.html).

5. Guanyu Xu, “Temporarily Censored Home,” *Lens Culture*, 2019, lensculture.com/articles/guanyu-xu-temporarily-censored-home.

6. Guanyu Xu, “my neighborhood, the same block #blacklivesmatter,” Instagram, [instagram.com/p/CBUlhWOF3X8](https://www.instagram.com/p/CBUlhWOF3X8).

7. As noted in the Introduction, I draw this notion of “saying” from Judith Butler.

8. Altman, *Theory of Narrative*, 15.

9. Relevant here is Bruno Latour’s concept of the “immutable mobile,” which speaks to the ways inscriptions and media artifacts manage to persist in their combinations and expressions in spite of movement and displacement, and sometimes toward rhetorically and politically advantageous ends (“Visualization and Cognition: Thinking with Eyes and Hands,” *Knowledge and Society* 6 [1986]: 1–40).

10. Rhizome, descriptions for Mariam Ghani and Chitra Ganesh, *How*