

ASSEMBLED CONTEMPORARIES

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“Assemblage has been something that has been part of our fabric, the art historical fabric, since the beginning of time. If you think about the notion of hunters and gatherers, until we became an agricultural society 10,000 years ago, that is how we found our food, we scavenged, we foraged, we hunted, we gathered. And I always felt that impulse embedded in our genes, and that artists themselves are a particular kind of hunter-gatherer.”[\[1\]](#)

Assemblage is an ordering of the world. Both act and creation, it encompasses production and collection; in its finished form, assemblage prefigures its consumption through the deliberate juxtaposition of materials. In art historical terms, assemblage is a medium, albeit one that is sometimes *too* capacious—materials are all technically “assembled” to produce artworks, and all can be traced back through a political-economic circuitry. Yet in the realm of art, both the innateness and consciousness of the act seem to be significant. In the words of Sotheby’s Chairman Lisa Dennison, quoted above, the capacity for assemblage is an impulse “embedded in our genes,” and, as an act, characterizes the work of an artist as “hunter-gatherer” – assembling in order to produce meaning and value; in other words, the stuff of art world survival.

Such ideas about assemblage—its impulses, capacities, and routes—inform my discussion of a ‘selling exhibition’ held last year at Sotheby’s gallery space in New York called [“Hunters and Gatherers: The Art of Assemblage”](#) (on view November 18th to December 16th, 2011). Showcasing a massive range of Western and non-Western objects that embody, in the words of its curators, the “accumulative tendency” in art, “Hunters and Gatherers” intended to show (and sell) nothing less than a new narrative of twentieth-century art history, a narrative grounded in material. Surrealist *objet*, neo-Dada collage, Songye power figure, Haida headdress, modernist Combine – major movements and diverse media were brought together under the rubric of their fabric, their status as assemblage. It produced a compelling, unifying story of art, looking forward as well as back: Nick Cave’s soundsuits appropriating (assembling?) tribal spiritualities, Dan Colen’s surface-obsessed painted sculpture a kind of fresh, contemporary Happening.

Based on catalogue descriptions—the “polychromed” Haida headdress, Western materials “ingeniously incorporated” into Native American material culture, the exclusively ceremonial contexts of the non-Western art, and the dubious universalism of the geneticized and apolitical urge to “assemble”—it would be warranted to dis-assemble this exhibition on the basis of its familiar primitivist tropes. Indeed, having not seen the exhibition in person, I can only imagine the visual force that such a juxtaposition of works would have as an assemblage. Together, the works might have comprised a perfect balance of on-the-wall and in-the-round, the wooden angles and planes of the African sculptures and Northwest Coast masks complementing the colors and textures of

mid-century paintings and collages. There is a reason that modernist interiors are often decorated with tribal art, instantiating a visceral-yet-contained chromophilia, or “tiptoeing around the perimeter of the color danger zone,” that Michael Taussig argues is an effect of colonial and post-colonial encounters[2]— the inimitable effect of a contained, colorful, polyglot assemblage in a white cube, and an exhibition designed to sell.

But the questions I want to consider through “*Hunters and Gatherers*” are more general, given my limited experience of the exhibition via its catalogue and media. There is also something perversely imprecise about saying anything ‘contemporary’ of an exhibition held over a year ago—time moves fast in art, and assemblages are often ephemeral. Still, one year later, the questions this particular cluster raises are, to use that value-laden term of the contemporary, ‘fresh.’[3] Why this story, and why in 2011? My suggestion is that this exhibition tells us something lasting about contemporary art, and its relation to theories of assemblage. It also tells us about the perils of making materiality too capacious a frame for theorizing the contemporary as an instantiation of, as the catalogue puts it, the “impulse to scavenge.”

RE-ASSEMBLAGE

First, a note on ancestors. “*The Art of Assemblage*,” the subtitle of “*Hunters and Gatherers*,” was likely a deliberate reference to the famous 1961 exhibition of the same name held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York – and one of the ways in which “*Hunters and Gatherers*” is bound to an art world lineage of modernism. For William Seitz, the curator of the 1961 show, assemblage was a modern notion, and thus had a history; both the creation of new art from fragments and the *self-conscious* execution could be traced back through all of the major modernist movements of the twentieth century, including Cubism, Surrealism, Dada, Abstract-Expressionism, and even further, to avant-garde nineteenth-century figures like Manet. Such a media-and-sentiment based narrative could include a spectacular range of work, encompassing, as Seitz put it in the catalogue, “*The Art, Non-Art, and Anti-Art of Assemblage*”— and, it should be remembered, providing a unifying narrative for MoMA’s collection, re-assembling the assemblage into a story of art.[4]

This reference to the 1961 show was, and is, extraordinarily generative. By including recent works, the “*Hunters and Gatherers*” established a connection between “the contemporary”—that ever-emergent, always-becoming, impossible category—and art history’s past, containing the unknown, un-categorizable contemporary within a stable framework of value and judgment. It *produces* a modernism for the contemporary, or a contemporary that can be fit back into the story of modernism. This is, as art historian Terry Smith has recently argued, a very contemporary thing to do. Smith suggests that both the tired return to an older avant-gardism – a process he names “remodernism”— and the self-conscious embrace of neo-liberal spectacular consumption—“retro-sensationalism”— are returns to modernist aesthetics that characterize much of contemporary art, naming many of the artists included in the Sotheby’s show as exemplars of such returns.[5] Moreover, as returns, they repress what is, at least for mainstream art histories, really new, and really *now*: other art histories that are global, decolonial, and deeply unsettling.[6]

Unlike its modern predecessor, “*Hunters and Gatherers*” explicitly addresses these other art histories. The incorporation of other cultures into Western art has, after all, had a long history in relation to modernism, and the catalogue recognizes the production of “hybrid compositions” throughout time a result of these encounters. Yet such recognition contains them within this modernist vision, a vision that is made contemporary by virtue of our shared genetic assemblage—no longer the “spirit” of Seitz’s *bricoleur*, but the genetic drive of the hunter-gatherer provides the compulsion to create. In such encounters, as in primitivist formulations, only the Western artist emerges as *bricoleur*-scavenger, Baudelaire’s ragpicker meets Indiana Jones as a disaffected, nomadic archaeologist of modern and contemporary civilization. What makes a difference in this new formulation of assemblage is how it submerges even as it incorporates. By acknowledging other art histories, “*Hunters and Gatherers*” enables a one-way tracking of routes between the West and non-West through a universalizing concept of assemblage, a concept that becomes a *contemporary* rubric under which non-Western objects—and only historical, ceremonial ones from the classic periods of collecting—can be recognized as “art.”

It is a familiar narrative, well-rehearsed in stories about the tribal and the modern. Yet this tracking is a particularly problematic framing in relation to the concept of assemblage. As Julia Kelly has argued, the 1961 “*Art of Assemblage*” exhibition, which did not explicitly include non-Western art as a form of assemblage, missed the extent to which non-Western ontologies of objects had conditioned many of the artists’ approach to materials. Specifically, Kelly suggests that “assemblage” as conceived here is as much about magical efficacy as components – hence Seitz’s emphasis on spirit and transformative potential – and thus draws much more upon anthropological translations of non-Western practices than on some essential tendency of the modern towards bricolage.^[7] In other words, assemblage happens as art because of the capacity of objects to *do* things.

This idea of efficacy continues to inform contemporary approaches to assemblage. In the video that accompanies the online component of “*Hunters and Gatherers*,” curator Elizabeth Gorayeb seamlessly connects early-twentieth century art as a mode of action – “representing the world as it could be, or how we can transform it in our mind” – to the contemporary desire to assemble as “universal force among all of us.” Such a framing is highly connective: it draws lineages between the past and the present, artist and collector, West and non-West, a connectivity and encompassment that justify the broad scope of the exhibition. As such, “*Hunters and Gatherers*” proposes that assemblage may itself be a theoretical tool, which is a position that uncannily resonates with much contemporary social theory.

Tracing the theoretical appeal of assemblage as a Deleuzian concept for analyzing such contemporary social formations, George Marcus and Erkan Saka suggest that the concept itself belies a particular kind of re-modernism, a desire for structure amidst the upsets of contemporary social theory. For Marcus and Saka, assemblage can provide an “evocation of emergence and heterogeneity amid the data of inquiry, in relation to other concepts and constructs without rigidifying into the thingness of final or stable states that besets the working terms of classic social

theory.”^[8] In other words, assemblage, as a theoretical tool, allows for an explanation of social action, of doing things, that is sufficiently ephemeral and processual. Analysis in such a frame consists of tracing the contingent connections that constitute emergent social worlds, and many of these social science approaches to social assemblage run parallel to certain art historical theories of relational aesthetics, which emphasize the emergence of social action via engagements with the material world.^[9]

I wonder about the extent to which both kinds of approaches to assemblage are constituted by notions of thing-ness that did not emerge from a hermetically-sealed modernism’s encounter with globalization, but from *particular* entanglements of the Western and the non-Western—indeed, the recognition of objects’ efficacies owes much to the messy entanglements of art worlds and artifacts. Such entanglements also include long histories of critical indigenous activism and scholarship that uses, usurps, and transcends modernist historiographies to inscribe what Steven Loft calls a cultural aesthetic, nuanced ways of knowing that presume different relations between subjects, objects, meaning and time.^[10] Yet these routes between indigenous aesthetics and notions of contemporary effect remain largely unexplored.

So we have a partial answer to “why assemblage” – it is a capacious category with ties to modernism, efficacy, and emergence. But what does invoking these ties mean *now*?

MATERIALITIES MATTER

Material World

Global Hub for Thinking About Things

© 2011, Tim Noble & Sue Webster *The New Barbarians*, 1997–99 Translucent resin, fibreglass
Dimensions: Figures: 79 x 69 x 137 cm Infinity cove: Painted medium-ply board Dimensions:

variable Photo: Robert Fairer [Source](#)

Tim Noble and Sue Webster's *The New Barbarians* is a work that embodies the themes of "Hunters and Gatherers." Formed out of fiberglass and resin, it is a sculptural self-portrait of the artists as early hominids, their hairless, sunken figures captured mid-stride in a foraging love story. *The New Barbarians* is deliberately evocative of an anthropological diorama in the Spitzer Hall of Human Origins at the American Museum of Natural History, which imagines the early hominids, figured according to gendered expectations as a man and a woman, who might have left footprints in volcanic ash at Laetoli 3.5 million years ago. The exhibition catalogue for "Hunters and Gatherers" notes the pathos that this reference to the diorama enables, as the *New Barbarians* are "installed in isolation and presented naked to the world, [evoking] a sort of exit-from-Eden melancholia." It is also an uncanny evocation: the *New Barbarians* maintain the contemporary facial features of the artists, bringing "this seemingly primitive pair into the present." Simultaneously monstrous and innocent, the work is a hybrid assemblage, depicting the artists as literal hunter-gatherers, and it riffs on evolutionary science with all of its innocent hopes and explanations of the hetero-normative family of man.

Yet it also embodies the *naturalness* of these hybrid materialities, which, I argue, is an integral subtext of "Hunters and Gatherers." The image of artist-as-*bricoleur* has always carried a certain innocence, an apolitical inscription of the encounters between modern and primitive. In such a story, we are all *New Barbarians*, our melancholic exodus a result of modernity. Like Baudelaire's ragpicker, we assemble ourselves from the detritus of civilization – Julian Schnabel's broken plate collage, Johnny Swing's coin couch, Jaehyo Lee's nail bed, routes, materials, and labor assembled to produce the contemporary and what Johanna Drucker has named its "complicit formalism": a focus on materiality that transcends both anti-modernism and critical post-modernism's political avant-gardism.^[11] What *is* new about these *New Barbarians* is that their accumulative tendency, the innocent appropriation of materials, is figured as evolution: inevitable genetic destiny, an "impulse," a "tendency."

Much of the non-Western art in the exhibition is also claimed by this narrative. For example, Northwest Coast art, we are told, is the result of “natural abundance” in the region, the success of hunting and gathering. Similarly functionalist language describes a late-nineteenth century basket attributed to Mary Dick Topino (Wukchumni Yokuts) as an object of beauty enabled by the “adaptability” and “high level of skill” of “hunter-gatherers.” None of this is untrue; certainly, art, environment, and the valuing of well-made objects are inextricably linked. Indeed, Surrealist Hans Bellmer, in his assemblage of doll parts for his *puppets*, could be considered similarly “adaptable” or “resourceful” in his recycling of his society’s material playthings. This cycle of accumulation and re-purposing is, in fact, the link drawn between West and non-West throughout “Hunters and Gatherers.” But the “adaptability” of Bellmer and his fellow artists is never named as such; instead, it is of a different, more active, sort, called “creativity” or “genius,” or, in Bellmer’s case, “obsession”: a conscious rather than an environmentally-enabled act.

Nothing is particularly new about these primitivist art world tropes, but they are worth highlighting here, because they reveal something about the kinds of connectivity that constitute assemblage. Coupled with the scientific romance of the “impulse to scavenge,” stories of adaptability obscure other networks and connections. For instance, the cross motifs on Topino’s basket, documented elsewhere in relation to her work as Christian imagery associated with two specific mission schools,[\[12\]](#) are not even mentioned in the basket’s relatively extensive catalogue note – indeed, certain kinds of “adaptability” are not considered part of the assemblage. Likewise, a marionette (“polychromed,” again) attributed to a Kwakwaka’wakw maker is noted as belonging to the Surrealist artist Wolfgang Paalen, who travelled to the Northwest Coast, where he assembled a collection whose “aesthetic exerted a profound influence upon his work” – a glossed mention of the complex encounters enabled by the process of creating assemblages. In effect, the real entanglements generated in the process of assemblage are forgotten, as the genetic impulse removes the very real stakes behind the question of who is assembling whom.

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In archaeological terms, when an assemblage with similar contents is repeated, it is referred to as a culture. If there is a lack of context for the recurrent assemblage, it is not quite a culture; it is an industry. “Hunters and Gatherers” assembled many of the tropes and strategies of containment that we have come to associate with the culture of art world primitivism, and did so in a way that I have been connecting to particular tendencies and narratives of “the contemporary” and its hybrid of scientific romance and willful forgetting, its particular engagement with materiality. Like good archaeologists, we would do well to not take every assemblage as an industry, and assume that “assemblage” is always-already complete. For it is precisely the *unexplored* potentialities of this mix, of the entanglement, that make assemblage a powerful metaphor for describing social and material worlds.

Notes

[1] From *Hunters and Gatherers* promotional video, available [here](#) . The catalogue of the exhibition may be found [here](#) .

[2] Michael Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 11.

[3] This usage of “fresh” is emphasized by the critic Johanna Drucker, who calls for fresh forms of theorizing that are complicit with the pace and materials of contemporary art. See Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2005), xv.

[4] William Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961): 6.

[5] Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 7-10.

[6] Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, 169.

[7] Julia Kelly, “The Anthropology of Assemblage,” *Art Journal* 67, 1(2008): 30.

[8] George Marcus and Erkan Saka, "Assemblage," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2006): 106.

[9] On relational aesthetics, see Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. S. Pleasance et al. (Dijon: Les Presses du reel, 2004). On the connections between anthropological *bricolage* and assemblage, see Anna Dezeuze, "Assemblage, Bricolage, and the Practice of Everyday Life," *Art Journal* 67, 1 (2008).

[10] Steven Loft, "Aboriginal Media Art and the Postmodern Conundrum: A Coyote Perspective," *Transference, Tradition, Technology*, ed. D. Claxton, S. Loft, and M. Townsend (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 2005), 90.

[11] Drucker, *Sweet Dreams*, xv.

[12] [Record 760/826](#), Fenimore Art Museum (n.d.), , accessed December 5th, 2012.