

# A Question of Grammar: Theorising Assemblage from the Inside

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## **Abstract**

In some sense, assemblage can usefully be said to begin with Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, although the artist himself would perhaps disagree with this statement. My research uses the making of assemblage sculpture within a dialogical framework derived from the work of Bakhtin to enact a necessary re-reading and interrogation of this subaltern tradition of sculptural practice.

In this paper, I argue that the specific poetic and associational possibilities inherent in the materiality of this medium remain largely unexamined, as the major studies of this subject (Seitz 1961, Janis and Blesh 1967 and Waldman 1992) tend to subsume assemblage into narratives which characterise it as a questioning or rejection of pictorialism, solely concerned with "violating the limits of representation" (Seitz 1961 p. 9) rather than acknowledging its own authentic identity and (representational) possibilities, both as a historical practice and as a contemporary strategy for artistic production.

In relation to this lack of a theorisation of assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari's use of the term in their work is of some interest, although their writing tends to emphasise "the process of arranging organising, fitting together" rather than "the arrangement or organisation" itself (Macgregor-Wise in Stivale 2005, p. 77). However I argue that, given the linkages between this mode of practice and Wittgenstein's use of the methodological strategies of juxtaposition and inversion, assemblage is perhaps more usefully re-thought within a grammatical framework which derives from a dialogical exchange between Wittgenstein's later work (as developed by Mulhall: 1990 and Savickey: 1999) and contemporary assemblage practice.

My research uses the making of assemblage sculpture within a dialogical framework to enact a necessary re-reading and interrogation of this subaltern tradition of sculptural practice, but before I discuss this, I would like to begin this presentation with a small apology. There may be some of you, who, having read my abstract, may be expecting a reasonably large helping of Bakhtin in this paper. I am afraid that I'm going to disappoint you, but I hope that what I am going to offer in its place may be of equal interest.

That abstract was written over a year ago, and within the lifespan of a doctoral research project, the passing of such a duration is of some significance. Priorities shift and change, and what may seem like an important or even central discovery can, over time and as it becomes integrated into the larger structure of the project, eventually end up assuming a supporting role rather than a central one. Such is the case with my use of Bakhtin, which I'd like to discuss briefly nonetheless

Although the concept of Dialogism is used in many different ways in the work of Bakhtin, and I also use this term to refer to more general notion of things being put into dialogue on equal term within the research process, at that point in time I was specifically interested in his notion of a dialogue which occurs between texts which are temporally separated:

“There are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) - they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue.” (1987, p. 170)

Bakhtin's concern was with the development of literary artforms, and whilst to suggest that these complex theories can be applied in a wholesale and indiscriminate fashion to the domain of the visual arts would be naïve, I maintain that this particular aspect of his theory can be extended to visual arts practice. On the basis of this insight, I argue that new work in the artistic medium of assemblage can change the ways in which historical works in the same medium can be read.

An example of the dialogical linking of temporally separate artworks is provided by my assemblage *Sentinel* (2006) which formally references *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) by Marcel Duchamp. Despite Duchamp's own assertion in 1961 that “the choice of [the] Readymades was never dictated by an aesthetic declaration” (quoted by Shattuck in Elderfield 1992, p.135) the

fact remains that, perhaps without meaning to, the 'Readymades' in general (and for me *Bicycle Wheel* particularly) initiate much of the formal and material vocabulary of subsequent object-based sculptural practice, i.e. the juxtaposing and inversion of everyday materials in order to produce sculptural form and extend the notion of the aesthetic to incorporate, interrogate (and in some cases celebrate) 'everyday' objects.

As well as fulfilling these functions, in the specific instance of *Sentinel*, additional capabilities of the artwork include its capacity to allude to both a human figure and an earlier, non-representational work of art. Given such developments, it is difficult, if not impossible to read the 'Readymades' with the "visual indifference" (quoted by Shattuck in Elderfield 1992: 135) which Duchamp had hoped to inspire. In this sense at least, the way in which these works can be read has irrevocably changed as a result of subsequent artistic production.

The role of Wittgenstein within this research is an altogether more complex one. Whilst I concentrate, to a large extent, on the implications of an encounter between his thinking on grammar, its subsequent development by Stephen Mulhall (1990) and others, and the artistic practice of assemblage sculpture, there is also a sense in which his methods (and his metaphorical unfolding of them) can prove useful as a description of this form of research project.

One of the key challenges of this investigation has been to find a way to avoid what I saw as a potentially disastrous instrumentalisation of my artistic practice, as to quote Wittgenstein (1953, p. vii) "my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any direction against their natural inclination."

For me at least, the inclination of practice is to wander and meander in directions which may not always make sense in relation to a more linear or instrumental model of progression. This metaphorical wandering through an area (or landscape) of interest strikes me as being comparable in nature to Wittgenstein's description of his own "journeyings" in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), in which he is compelled

"...to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction. – The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and involved journeyings... The same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new sketches made."(p vii).

Leaving aside for reasons of space the very interesting way in which Wittgenstein appropriates the role of the artist to describe his philosophical activities, the use of a spatial metaphor of this kind facilitates an understanding of the processes of research of this nature, allowing the practitioner to grasp that the ebb and flow of the importance of the 'features' of the project is merely a by-product of a movement in "a field of thought", and as such is only to be expected, as is the case with the change in my estimation of the importance of Bakhtin. With regard to the primary significance of Wittgenstein in this project, I would first like to say a little about the subject of my research, in order to show the necessity of this engagement with his philosophy.

As I suggested earlier, sculptural assemblage can be understood in terms of a displacement and reinvention of objects that is achieved through strategies of juxtapositioning and inversion. To return to a literally defining moment, the 1961 MOMA exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* is generally agreed to be the point at which the term 'assemblage' finally came into common currency, as a direct result of curator William Seitz's decision to use it in the title of the exhibition (against some institutional opposition, according to Shattuck in Elderfield 1992, p.119). The fact that assemblage is not clearly defined as a separate medium for much of its life, but is subsumed into collage is not without significance, as I intend to show.

In his essay for the catalogue of the exhibition, Seitz defined assemblage as follows:

"1. They are predominantly assembled rather than painted, drawn, modelled or carved. 2. Entirely or in part, their constituent elements are preformed natural or manufactured materials, objects or fragments not intended as art materials." (p. 6).

Seitz also suggested that this medium makes use of the associative qualities of the constituent objects of the artwork in order to achieve its poetic effects, as it "raises materials from the level of formal relations to that of associational poetry" (p. 84). He went on to describe the mechanism by which this happens:

"When paper is soiled or lacerated, when cloth is worn, stained or torn, when wood is split, weathered or patterned with peeling coats of paint, when metal is bent or rusted, they gain connotations which unmarked materials lack" (p. 84).

That assemblage as artistic practice should be so closely linked to poetry is perhaps only to be expected, given Seitz's account of the ways in which both poets and artists began to experiment

with assemblage at around the turn of the last century, and the often significant interpenetrations and overlaps which occurred between these fields at this time. Some practitioners produced both art and poetry (as was the case with Kurt Schwitters, whose practice encompassed collage, assemblage, installation and performance poetry) whilst others (such as Guillaume Apollinaire, the Futurist Filippo Marinetti, and a little later the Surrealist André Breton) sought to create new hybrid artforms which drew equally from verbal and visual idioms.

According to Seitz's account, the creative use of discarded and damaged objects by artists, poets and those in-between opens up poetic associations through the traces of human presence (and absence) they bear and by the evidence of the passing of time shown by their wear and tear. In short, these things bear witness to (and lead to) the world. What is not made clear here is what these things do, both in terms of their associational possibilities and in terms of their formal qualities, in relation to a wider world.

Despite the interesting points made here by Seitz, in the key art historical texts on this subject (Seitz, 1961, Janis and Blesh, 1967, and Waldman, 1992) collage and assemblage are often troublingly assimilated into a unitary narrative which characterises such practices solely as a questioning or rejection of pictorialism, concerned only with "violating the limits of representation" (Seitz, 1961, p. 9). However 'found' objects have been used in artistic practice in a wide variety of roles and contexts over the century. Within my own practice I have explored some of these roles, by using them as 'themselves', in multiple, or as components within representational schema. From this art historical view point at least, objects seem to be at liberty to remain themselves, or assist in the destruction of representation, whereas their own representational possibilities i.e. that which they might 'become' or allude to (whilst still remaining 'themselves' are often sorely neglected.

Although Seitz provides probably the only convincing account of the origins of and (historical) possibilities of assemblage, the specific capabilities and potentials of this particular method of making sculpture, understood both as an historical practice and a contemporary method of production, are still yet to be examined in any real depth from either an art historical or philosophical perspective.

Whilst the writing of Deleuze and Guattari (1998) may at first seem of relevance, given their deployment of a critical theoretical notion of assemblage, I argue that their theorisation lacks relevance in this instance. Although it provides an account of assemblage (in terms of "qualities,

speeds and lines”, see Macgregor-Wise in Stivale, 2005, p. 80) in my opinion it cannot provide a convincing description for the formal structures of assemblages (or their relationship to their context) in relation to this form of artistic practice.

With regard to the later category I suspect that this failure is due to the emphasis they place on “the process of arranging organising, fitting together” rather than the nature of “the arrangement or organisation” (Macgregor-Wise in Stivale 2005: 77). Indeed, much of the assumed relevance of this term to this area of artistic practice seems to stem from the arguable mis-translation of the French word ‘agencement’ as ‘assemblage’. According to Philips,

“agencement is a common French word with the senses of either ‘arrangement’, ‘fitting’ or ‘fixing’ and is used in French in as many contexts as those words are used in English... In contrast, the word assemblage in English means more or less the same as its actual French counterpart, assemblage, a word that Deleuze and Guattari use less often and certainly never in a philosophical sense.” (2006: 88)

Whilst it must be said that the notions of ‘fixing’ and ‘arrangement’ are of relevance to this project, and certainly merit further discussion, I suggest that they remain essentially a part of the process of *producing* an assemblage, and as such cannot describe the relationship between the completed art work and the ‘form of life’ in which it is embedded.

I should add here that ‘form of life’ is probably one of the most difficult Wittgensteinian concepts to elucidate, precisely because by its very nature it resists such manoeuvres. Suffice it to say that, here at least, I take it to mean a way of living in the world, recognisable to those that share it, which incorporates and enfolds the overlapping fields of the physical, the cultural and the social in a living linguistic mesh.

The relevance of Wittgenstein to the study of sculptural assemblage is twofold. To begin with, his work on aspect in relation to Jastrow’s ‘Duck-Rabbit’ deals specifically with the way in which representational images (or objects) can ‘vibrate’ between states, opening up for discussion the way in which representation functions in assemblage. However the unpacking and development of this portion of his work also yields some unexpected insights in relation to a wider consideration of assemblage as a whole. Before proceeding with these explorations, I would like to briefly discuss the way in which Wittgenstein uses the term grammar’.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There has been some debate as to whether Wittgenstein is using this word (grammar) in an ‘ordinary’ sense or not, for clarification on this matter see Forster (2004: 17-18).

Savickey (1999)<sup>2</sup> suggests that:

“...the investigation of grammar is (variously) descriptive, responsive and preventive of philosophical misunderstanding... [and that]... there is no short answer, explanation or definition of this term (not because such an answer, explanation or definition is missing or yet to be found, but because this is not what we need to clarify our confusion or misunderstanding).” (p. 100)

Mulhall (1990) has suggested that, “for [Wittgenstein], any philosophical investigation was a grammatical investigation” (p. 127) and he also usefully clarifies this term (in a similar fashion to Savickey) as “a process of delineating the conceptual structures pertinent to the issues and confusions under examination” (p. 127). Whilst there is no doubt that the origins and usage of Wittgenstein’s notion of grammar are linguistic, I argue that grammar provides a way of thinking about structures which makes it relevant to the study of assemblage, given that we must always use language to discuss such matters. In short, in some sense at least, to quote Wittgenstein, “grammar tells us what kind of object anything is.” (1953, p. 116).

But how does this happen? Within his later philosophical method, as evinced in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) Wittgenstein often disrupts the grammar of everyday thought and action in order to make a point. Judith Genova (1995) describes this process as follows:

“The direct address of the text invites readers to scrutinize a belief, to see in this light instead of that, to vary circumstances and stretch the imagination. His repeated demands to “suppose this” and “imagine that” urge us to stop reading and perform the experiment itself to see if it is valid.” (p. 2)

A particularly good example of this process of substitution or, to redeploy a quotation from Max Ernst, “systematic putting out of place” (1948. p. 21) occurs here, at the beginning of Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations*:

““For a second he felt violent pain,”- Why does it sound queer to say: “For a second he felt deep grief”? Only because it so seldom happens?” (p. 174)

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<sup>2</sup> Savickey’s study provides an exhaustive examination of Wittgenstein’s methods of grammatical investigation and identifies all of his key methods.

Leaving aside the specific point which Wittgenstein is attempting to make here for reasons of brevity, what I feel is of interest in relation to this paper is the way in which “grief” is substituted into a grammatical structure which would normally be more appropriate for the word “pain”. By doing this Wittgenstein attempts to draw our attention to the similarities and differences in the way in which these two words are used, with a view to allowing us to understand that it is their context (or the grammar of their usage) which determines their sense.

I would now like to move on to briefly discuss Wittgenstein’s handling of ‘aspect’ in the *Philosophical Investigations*. He begins by describing it as follows:

“I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I see that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience ‘noticing an aspect’.” (p. 193).

Mulhall (1990, p. 6)<sup>3</sup> expands upon this definition, noting that whilst Wittgenstein draws upon a variety of different examples in his exploration of aspect “in all cases the central features of the phenomenon are unchanged” (p. 6). He clarifies this as follows;

“In particular, the examples share the air of *paradox* which characterises aspect-dawning as an experience; for when we notice the change of aspect, we see the figure (or face) differently and yet we also see that it has not changed.” (p. 6-7).

Perhaps the most well known example of aspect-dawning in the *Philosophical Investigations* is Wittgenstein’s appropriation of Jastrow’s ‘Duck-Rabbit’, though it must be said that in many ways this is not a typical example of aspect-dawning, in that we are only able to see the ‘rabbit’ or the ‘duck’ at any one time. In some sense, it is the ‘visibility’ of aspect dawning in relation to this drawing which leads Wittgenstein to use it as an example of this phenomenon, in order to focus our attention on what he terms “the continuous seeing of an aspect” (1953, p. 194).

Whilst there has been a great deal of debate over the last sixty years as to the implications of ‘continuous aspect seeing’, this is not the time or place for an in-depth examination of such matters. Suffice it to say that in my opinion, Wittgenstein was attempting to draw our attention to our tendency to read objects in a particular way because we understand and are familiar with their function. An example of this is provided by the fact that we always seem to know which

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<sup>3</sup> Mulhall also notes that “of all the topics which seem to have dominated Wittgenstein’s thought and writings, his treatment of aspect perception is one of the least explored and least understood” (1990: 1).



end of a car is the front and which is the back, without giving it to much thought or becoming involved in interpretative dilemmas, though of course it is possible to imagine a car which might provide us with this problem.

Although the Wittgensteinian treatment of aspect does draw our attention to the way in which objects and images can 'vibrate' between states, the fact remains that 'in the wild', assemblage in its representational guise fails to conform to the entreaties of philosophers. An example of this is provided by the following artwork. *Upwards and Onwards* is a sculpture which I completed in May 2007.

Incidentally this piece also led me towards the elucidation of the 'wandering' nature of my research, as in hindsight the physical movement of this 'horned animal' (that is to say, a 'moving forward', which is also a 'reaching out' and a 'climbing and turning to align with a new territory') seemed to 'give form to' and clarify 'the movement' of my research.

That aside, the point that I want to make here is that this artwork and others like it, such as the original version of Picasso's *Bull's Head* (1943), prior to be it being cast (and thus becoming somewhat homogenised in the process) refuse to conform to the stable states between which the 'Duck-Rabbit' migrates, or the supposedly straightforward readings of objects upon which continuous aspect perception rests. In short, it's a goat, but it's also a table with a part of a lectern stuck to it. What to do?

One could perhaps always turn to that rarest of breeds for clarification – the self-confessed philosopher-artist. Dr Justin Good styles himself thus and has recently written eloquently on Wittgenstein and what he terms 'the grammar of sight'. Whilst much of his work is concerned with a critique of neuroaesthetics and with developing a Wittgensteinian approach to the study of perception, he does touch on art in general, and specifically sculpture in relation to aspect perception.

"For example, we could imagine a conceptual sculpture involving ordinary spoons, but constructed in such a way that the spoons appear to be anthropomorphic figurines or alien seed pods. In that context we can imagine saying of someone who does not understand the sculpture, 'He's seeing the spoons as spoons'."(2006, p.33)

Good develops this example at great length, and whilst I am almost prepared to forgive a certain degree of artistic naïveté which is revealed in his choice of the words 'conceptual sculpture',

what is perhaps slightly more disappointing is the way in which he remains steadfastly stuck in the paradigm of the thing as only ever itself *or* something else, and never allows for the possibility of simultaneously itself *and* something else.

It is perhaps slightly more understandable, given their respective and relatively pure philosophical backgrounds that neither Wittgenstein nor Mulhall<sup>4</sup> (whose work provides the most articulate development of Wittgenstein's writing on aspect) allow for the possibility of simultaneity, or recognise any real difference between noticing an aspect in relation to images which represent something, and the way in which aspect functions in relation to representational objects which exist in a space and unfold themselves over time as the viewer moves around them. Whilst there is unfortunately not time to deal with this matter here, the practical investigation of this area will form a major part of the final stage of this project.

Moving forward to deal with the wider implications of Wittgenstein's treatment of aspect, it strikes me that a connection may also be made here between his use of the 'atypical' aspect function of the 'Duck-Rabbit' in order to draw attention to the 'everyday' (and therefore perhaps less visible) functioning of 'continuous aspect perception' and the way in which assemblage can, by creating either combinations or arrangements of objects which disrupt the grammar of the everyday world, allow us the opportunity to break through habituated vision and see things anew. Indeed given the richness of their associative qualities of their materials (as suggested by Seitz 1961, p. 84) and the way in which these materials are drawn from the immediate cultural and physical environment, it may well be that this is a medium which is particularly well suited to exposing the unseen grammar of our 'forms of life'.

Conversely, this would also seem to imply that looking at assemblage in grammatical terms might also prove a fruitful way of understanding the capabilities of the medium. Of course, this is not to suggest that it can provide a generalisable 'theory of assemblage'. Rather, it must always be the case that this framework that can be used as a lens through which to view specific works and gain insights into some of the ways in which they function as artworks. To finish this paper, I would to examine one artwork briefly through this lens, by means of providing an example of how such a method might work.

The artwork in question is *Illegal Operation* (1962) by Ed Kienholz. This a complex piece, which is capable of a far more in-depth interpretation than I have time for here, both in terms of the

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<sup>4</sup> This collapsing of categories is made particularly visible in Wittgenstein's repeated use of the term 'picture —objects'. With regard to Mulhall's continuation of this confusion in relation to picture and object see (1990: 132).

social commentary which it purports to provide and also the possibilities for debate that it raises in relation to the way in which it alludes to the female form. Nonetheless, for reasons of brevity I would like to focus solely on a grammatical reading of the work, and I hope you will forgive me for this omission.

The arrangement of these objects seems at first to be relatively straight forward, in that they appear to represent the setting for an illegal abortion. We recognise this scene, either from our own imaginations, or from similar scenes which we have seen in films or on television. In short, things are where we expect them to be. The disturbance in the grammar is in some ways subtle (and in other ways not so subtle). The primary substitution is of the leaking sack of cement for the female form, a literal (and perhaps somewhat questionable) objectification of femininity which gives the piece its raw and still shocking effect, nearly 50 years on.

Once we are able to see this object as a figure, secondary grammatical disruptions begin to come into play: The tape which joins the lamp stand to the shopping trolley (itself a substitution for a chair, perhaps because of the medical associations of its grid-like structure) can now be read as an outstretched arm and hand, clinging to something in pain and terror. The stool itself, which references the absent abortionist, now seems strangely capable of malevolent action itself.

Given the inclination to read the bag of cement as a body, it seems only natural to read other objects in this setting as actors. In this sense, Kienholz disrupts the ordinary grammar of this setting, and through the associational qualities of the objects he has chosen, imposes a different grammar upon the artwork, one which vibrates between several possible readings.

In summary, whilst I hope that I have shown today that grammatical readings of sculptural assemblage are a viable proposition and can make a valuable contribution to the understanding of the particularities of this medium it should not be thought that this is yet another instance of artistic practice merely being described by theory (or “subject to its applications” as Nixon has put it, 2000, p. 84). This is far from being the case, as although the work of Wittgenstein and subsequent authors is of some relevance to this field of artistic practice, I argue that the specific insights which I have outlined briefly in this paper could only have emerged from a dialogical encounter between theory and practice which is driven by a practitioner’s enthusiasm for and knowledge of their subject, and a recognition that the story of one’s chosen medium remains in some sense still untold.

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